
SORRY JACK...CHUCKY'S BACK!
CHILD'S PLAY 2
A Novel by Matthew J. Costello
Based on a Screenplay by Don Mancini
JOVE · 0-515-10434-5 · [$4.95 CANADA] · 95 U.S.

Once there was a doll named Chucky who did naughty, wicked things. Like murder.

But Andy and his mother killed Chucky. Killed the madman whose deranged spirit possessed the doll. Killed him once and for all.

That's what they think.

CHILD'S PLAY 2

Andy's in a foster home now. His mother is undergoing psychiatric treatment. And Chucky . . . ?

The toy makers decided there was nothing wrong with the doll. So they rebuilt him. Now Andy has more reason than ever to fear for his life . . .

Chucky's back—and he wants Andy's soul.



A Novel by Matthew J. Costello
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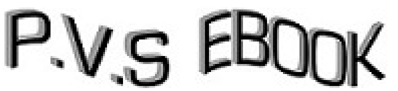
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CHILD'S PLAY
2

1

He looked down.

Into a vast, bottomless cavern, its twin walls filled with jagged points and razor-sharp edges. It seemed to go on forever, into an abyssal blackness.

Something monstrous was right there, right next to the cavern, hovering, shimmering. It caught the light.

And it reflected the light right back at him, right up to his optivisors, magnifying lenses that he wore, which looked like the most high tech prescription eyeglasses ever made.

"No good," Bob Meyer said, pulling back and then flipping the optivisors up. His eyes crossed as the room shrunk back to normal proportions. He looked over at the other technician, the other sap who had been dragged out of bed at 4 A.M. to work on this . . . this . . .

He looked at the black mess in front of him.

It was no longer recognizable, not as a doll. The head, what was left of it, was held in a vise. All of the plastic filament hair had been burned into a thick crud that stuck to the skull frame like tar.

The other technician, an old-timer who had been with Play Pals Toys from the beginning, licked his lips and gestured at the thing with his hands. Hal Turner had helped create it. Not that he ever got a penny from the thousands, *the millions,* that were sold. But he had been there from the beginning, working on the design, making the primitive animatronics work.

Now, he acted like an embarrassed father who sees that his kid has gone wrong. A little breaking and entering, a little first-degree murder . . . Where did *I* go wrong?

"I'll move the light," Turner said, coughing as if nervous at how thin his voice sounded in the large lab.

Meyer nodded while Turner positioned the light behind the doll's deformed head.

Now the head was outlined, and Meyer could almost make out the sickeningly recognizable shape, the cute, adorable face that America's rug-rats loved.

The Good Guy doll.

Except this one had been through hell.

No . . . something worse than that. This one had done something

bad. Or so the papers said.

"That's good," Meyer said, watching the light fall into position.

He flipped down the optivisor, and the lab blurred into mammoth proportions. "Okay," he said, "now let's take another look."

Meyer leaned close to the skull. And the closer he came to the head, the more he smelled the foul stench of burned plastic. He peered at the one eye left in the head, looking into the crack. If there was something wrong with the doll's photoelectric and audio sensors, it would show up here. The eyes actually acted as sound-and-movement sensors. The doll could detect where a sound was coming from, turn its head, and say, "Hidey-ho! Wanna play?"

And that's about all it was supposed to do, that and utter a few more reassuring things like, "I like to be hugged."

But this one didn't just like to be hugged. This doll—Chucky—had done a *whole lot more.*

Meyer brought the scalpel into the crack. He saw the now-gigantic blade slide into the cleft of the valley, testing the ragged walls. He paused just a bit and—

"Do you see anything, Bob?" Turner asked. "Are the sensors still intact?"

Meyer sensed the other technician behind him, standing very still. But he was standing well back, still disowning his offspring.

Meyer pushed against one wall with the blade, trying to nudge it open a bit more. The eye seemed intact. He moved the blade to the other side, pushing gently, then with a bit more force.

Except for the crack, the eye seemed fine, nothing wrong with it at all.

"No," Meyer said. "Everything's—"

He was still looking at the giant eye, the giant blade. He nodded to Turner. They'd be able to get the circuits up and running, maybe see what had happened—

The blade moved. Something gave way . . .

The eye moved. It seemed to slide out of the black, crusty hole, pop out. Into the air.

Without thinking, Meyer recoiled. It had to be flying right at him. He tried looking for the eye, but everything was, of course, oversized, a great smeary, crystalline blur.

"Where is it?" he muttered. "What the hell happened to it?"

He heard it fall.

"Damn!" he said.

"I—I guess it *was* loose," Turner said, annoyingly repeating the

obvious.

“Right,” Meyer agreed.

He flipped up his visor. The twin hemispheres of the lone eye were at his feet, useless now, completely disconnected from the CPU of the Good Guy doll’s computer chips. They’d have to put in new eyes now, rebuild the entire thing, just to see if they could figure out what in the world—

He looked up at Chucky’s head.

God, it looked even more like a skull now. Most of its tough plastic teeth were gone, and now it had two black sockets where its bright blue eyes used to be.

And it was staring right at Meyer.

Funny thing, he thought, taking a breath. He could still see the puffy pouches of the Good Guy doll’s cheeks, as if it were still a happy little Good Guy, sure, smiling right at him, just waiting for its next adventure . . .

“Okay,” he said to Turner. “Let’s start rebuilding the sucker.”

It hadn’t been easy getting the doll from the DA’s office.

No, Sullivan thought, as he looked out the window of his limo. His Lincoln rumbled across the Wacker Street Bridge. A hint of color touched the sky. A bit of purple, a pale orange. He reached out and took another sip of his coffee.

Tom Sullivan wasn’t used to such early hours. Not anymore, not since the small company that he had begun with just one toy concept had turned into an entire industry. It wasn’t just the Good Guy doll and accessories anymore. There was the weekly Good Guy television show, ever-steady in the afternoon ratings no matter in which time slot some local station stuck it. And there was the movie, finally with a halfway decent script—a live-action Good Guy film with some major bucks behind it. The income from the Good Guy clothes alone was more than what Sullivan had made in his first five years. This Good Guy was the horn of plenty. There seemed to be no end, no limit.

Until the incident.

That’s how he referred to it. *The incident.* The police had their own theory, one that the press had jumped on with their usual blood lust for a hot story. The tabloids went crazy—the strange little boy and his killer doll!

Maybe someone in the Play Pals factory had tampered with one of the dolls, altered its circuits so that it said, “Hi, I’m Chucky, the Lakeside Strangler!”

And maybe it was programmed to do other, more malevolent tricks.

But the police wouldn't let Sullivan have the doll—what was left of it anyway: a chunk of the torso, all burned out, and the head.

Not until last night.

Finally his lawyers were able to obtain a court order forcing the DA to hand the remains over, now that the principals were all accounted for: the mother, the kid. The DA's office was curious about the doll too.

The facts of the matter were simple enough: Nobody knew what had happened. Not a clue.

In the meantime, the sales of Good Guy dolls, Good Guy toys, and Good Guys clothes quickly declined. Some stations even dropped "The Good Guy Show"! It was bad, and it looked as if it could get worse.

Unless, Sullivan thought, we find out what did happen to that damn doll . . .

He took another sip of coffee. It was cold, almost oily on his lips. He spat it back into the cup. His limo hit a bump, and some of the coffee sloshed over onto the black carpet, nearly dotting his shoes.

He didn't want to get involved. At first, he thought he would just let his technicians work on the doll, let them play detective.

But then his lawyer pointed out one key fact. "It's your company, Tom. And no matter what went wrong, it's your neck on the chopping block."

He rubbed his cheek, feeling the rubbery texture of his skin. I need my morning workout, he thought. My bowl of oat bran. A massage. A steam bath.

Instead, the limo took a deserted corner, turning away from the pale blue glow that was blooming in the east.

Sullivan looked out the window. Right at the Play Pals building, right at the oversized Good Guy who waved at a sleeping Chicago from atop the building. The Good Guy's giant arm went up and down, and his eyes blinked. His freckled cheeks looked even rosier highlighted by the first light of dawn.

Sullivan looked up at the giant doll as they passed by the building and thought, It looks like a monster. A giant creature out of a Japanese horror film. *Attack of the Killer Good Guy.*

The limo stopped.

His door was popped open.

And his smile faded.

The scalpel hit metal . . . probably a screw, Meyer thought. The head armature itself was made of a fire-resistant plastic.

Meyer scraped away the burnt covering, then leaned over to his silver tool tray and wiped his blade clean, leaving a thick tarlike paste behind. This was more like sculpting than cleaning, because the goo was solid and he had to chisel through it.

Finally he leaned back and looked at the head.

"What do you think?" he said to Turner.

The older technician stood a bit closer, less frightened now that the burnt black covering was breaking off.

"You—you've got most of it."

"Okay, well then—how about some chompers for the boy . . ." Meyer stuck his plastic-covered fingers into the doll's open mouth.

He sensed Turner tightening up, thinking, Meyer guessed, better you than me, pal. Meyer watched his fingers disappear into Chucky's black maw as he dug around for the molars. He felt them—all wobbly and lose—and quickly popped them out. The doll only had two of its front teeth. And they both sprung free after a bit of tugging.

He took a new set of teeth from the tray, two plastic semicircles of uppers and lowers. Meyer had to force them into the sockets—something had obviously gotten a bit twisted in there.

"Hand me the epoxy . . . ," he said to Turner.

He saw Turner's hand shake as he handed him the small glue gun. Meyer filled the holes and gaps he felt with a thin line of the fastener.

"We should hurry . . . ," Turner said.

Meyer looked up at the clock. 5:40 A.M. Disgustingly early in the morning. They had only twenty minutes left. Twenty minutes before the boss arrived.

"Okay, okay," Meyer said. "I'm almost done here."

Meyer picked up the latex mold that fit flush to the doll's head. He held it in place and then grabbed a staple gun. He pressed the trigger, shooting the staples into the edge of the mold. The doll had skin again.

He picked up a clear piece of acetate covered with orange dots. He pressed it against the doll's new face and presto! It had freckles.

"Hey, kid," Meyer said to the doll. "You're not looking too bad."

But the doll still had a smudgy black cranium. Turner handed Meyer the hair.

"Nice mop. God, where did they get that color red?" Meyer positioned the hair on the doll's head. It didn't seem to land right, first a bit too far forward, then a bit back, always exposing some of the burned shell.

Finally Meyer just shrugged and brought the staple gun up again to

fasten the scalp down. It didn't have to look perfect . . .

"Okay, Hal . . . he's all yours . . ."

Meyer backed away as Turner carried a Good Guy torso over to the head. The overalls were a brilliant blue, and the colorful striped shirt shone in the light.

Turner seemed to take forever fitting the head to the body. Then he stepped back, admiring his work. He looked around and picked up the arms. He started putting one in the wrong socket, getting the hand backward.

"Oh," he said to himself.

What's the guy so shook up about? Meyer wondered. Is he worried because he helped create the Good Guy? Is he afraid he'll lose his pension?

Turner finally got the arms right. Then he put the legs on. One of the doll's red sneakers slid off.

"I'll get it," Meyer said.

He bent down to the floor and picked it up. The sneaker's sole had pictures imprinted on it of objects important in the Good Guy universe: a tepee, a horse, an airplane, a hammer.

A hammer . . .

The baby-sitter, the woman's friend, had been killed by a Good Guy hammer. Right through the skull . . . and then she fell out the window. Seven stories down.

The kid said that Chucky must have done it.

Nobody believed that . . . But that just left the kid as the numero uno suspect.

Meyer stood up and put the sneaker on.

And then he looked up.

The doll was staring blankly right at him, almost complete, almost intact, almost new . . .

"Now for some new baby blues . . ."

He reached out and took the two eyes off the tray. He felt the back of each eye for the small nine-pin connectors that plugged right into the head's computer board, which, unless he was crazy, had to be malfunctioning. But their orders were to try and get the doll up and running—if it was possible.

He fit the eyes into an attachment on the laboratory drill that hung suspended over the doll. The drill would lower the eyes into the skull and plug them in.

He popped each eye into the attachment. Then—hesitating for one grisly moment—he stuck a finger into each eye socket, making sure

the black holes were clear. He had his fingers stuck in the holes when he heard a sound.

After a moment he realized it was the sound of the elevator arriving, just down the hall.

Meyer looked back at the doll, complete except for the eyes, and said, "Hello, Chucky! It's show time . . ."

"Good morning, Mr. Sullivan."

Sullivan nodded. He saw Mattson, his Operations VP, standing beside the chauffeur, looking cold and uncomfortable. Good, Sullivan thought. At least that makes me feel better. Then he saw the briefcase dangling from Mattson's hand.

"I've got a board meeting in an hour . . . I hope you have some good news . . . ," Sullivan said. He walked past the chauffeur, heading straight into the building.

Mattson hurried to walk alongside Sullivan. "Yes, Mr. Sullivan . . . I mean, there's some good news and . . ." Mattson ran ahead, turning to Sullivan in midstammer. He grabbed the door that led into the Research and Development Building. Sullivan had to break his pace while Mattson fumbled opening it.

"Yes, go on," Sullivan said, "Your news . . . ?" He walked inside and immediately smelled the plastic, a sweet, dizzying, all-pervasive odor. Sullivan didn't like coming here anymore.

Mattson popped open his briefcase, propping it against his body as he walked. He took out some manila folders.

"There are the sales records, Mr. Sullivan. They seem to have bottomed out. Whatever . . . er . . . damage we're going to take, we've taken."

"And the police?"

"They've denied the whole story, everything the boy and the mother said. They're willing to wait until we're done, until we've come up with some answer."

Mattson handed Sullivan the first folder—a sales graph. Then he handed him two more. "The mother—she's been placed under court-ordered psychiatric observation. And I think the cops involved have been put on paid leave. Nobody wants the story to get out . . . at least not the way *she* told it."

Sullivan nodded. They walked to the elevator at the end of the corridor. Sullivan beat an embarrassed Mattson to the button. Then he flipped open the folder labeled *Barclay, Karen.* He looked at her photo. She was a pretty woman, a sales clerk who sold jewelry. There was nothing in the photo to indicate that she was an unbalanced woman.

Mattson handed him another photo.

Barclay, Andy.

“The boy is still at the Glencoe Children’s Crisis Center. He’s going to be placed with foster parents . . . until his mother is out. He’ll also get regular counseling, therapy . . .” Mattson paused and Sullivan shot him a glance. “But he’s been sticking to his story, says the doll was real, that it was alive, that it . . .”

The elevator arrived with a cheerful ding and Sullivan hurried in. After all, he didn’t want to hear any of that malarkey.

Not a bit of it . . .

2

Mattson pushed open the door for him while Sullivan glanced up at the sign that said Research and Development.

How long has it been since I've been here, he thought. Not since the early days . . . And, as he walked into the observation room of the lab, he saw that a lot of things had changed.

He faced an enormous plate-glass window with a panoramic view of the lab, which was enormous. Black boxes lined one wall, and various drills and hoists were suspended from the ceiling—everything needed to design and test the modern toy.

But Sullivan's eyes focused on the two technicians standing in the bright pool of light, concentrating on the doll.

"Can they hear us?" he said to Mattson.

"Yes, if you want . . ." Mattson pointed at a switch.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Sullivan said, flicking the switch on. He saw the two technicians look up. Then he recognized Hal Turner. We go back a long way together, Sullivan thought. A long way . . . There would be no Good Guys without Turner. And he probably knew that.

Turner squinted in the darkness.

"Good morning, Mr. Sullivan," the other technician said, answering for them both. Sullivan saw Hal Turner wave weakly. This craziness has to be confusing him. It's partly his baby.

"Are you all set in there, Bob?" Mattson said.

"Just . . . about," the younger technician said. "We're ready to put the new eyes in . . ."

"That's Bob Meyer," Mattson said, whispering. "One of the best microchip boys. He'll find out what's wrong," Mattson said confidently. He radiated a confidence that Sullivan didn't share at all.

"Okay . . . ," Bob Meyer said. "That should be it. Hal, would you bring the drill down a bit." Sullivan noticed that Meyer seemed to be calling the shots. Turner was just an old lab man.

Sullivan watched Meyer take the doll and turn it horizontally. Now both its head and torso were held by clamps. Then Meyer reached up to the drill. Sullivan saw the attachment on the drill: two prongs holding marble-shaped objects—the eyes . . .

"Okay," Meyer said, looking over at the observation room. "We

should be able to see what's working and what's not working in this baby . . ."

Sullivan heard him mutter something that he apparently didn't think the microphones would pick up.

". . . which is probably nothing . . ."

The whir of the drill started, amplified loudly in the observation room. Sullivan winced at the screeching noise. Mattson said, "Should I lower the volume, sir? I can."

Sullivan shook his head. He wanted to hear everything. See everything.

Meyer reached up for the prongs. "The doll's been rebuilt from the ground up, Mr. Sullivan. Everything except the integrated circuits and the microprocessor inside the head. The brains of the thing. But it could be that will be a wash, too. We'll know soon enough."

Sullivan looked down. He noticed that he had clenched his fists, that he was gripping the edge of the table.

He brought his hands up and flexed them, splaying his fingers out, trying to relieve the tension. Easy, he told himself. It's all over. This is just an investigation.

No, it's an autopsy.

lust to see whether we have any blame, any culpability in this matter.

The drill sound changed. Sullivan saw Turner lean closer, looking over Meyer's shoulder as he lowered the machine that would insert the eyes.

And then—just when Sullivan was about to take a breath—the drill went silent.

He heard Meyer say, "Hey, what's wrong?"

Turner went back to the base of the machine, looking at it, flicking buttons.

"I . . . I don't know. There isn't anything—"

Mattson coughed.

And then the whirring sound returned, but louder, crazed now. Out of control.

And the machine plunged down violently into the doll's head, jabbing down as though stabbing at the doll. Meyer's hand was still on it, trying to guide it. At first tiny sparks flew off the machine. Then more sparks, and bigger sparks, until Sullivan saw Meyer gyrating uncontrollably while holding onto the machine, as if he were a puppet being jerked around by some bored kid. The sparks flew into the air. They fell onto the floor, glowing for seconds at a time.

Meyer, with great effort, turned around and faced the observation booth, his hands still locked on the machine, frozen by the electricity running through the machine, right into him.

"Jesus . . . ," Mattson said.

Meyer's eyes bulged—right out, looking at Sullivan. Tiny plumes of smoke rose up from his body. And Sullivan had a creepy thought: At least we can't smell anything in here.

Hal Turner ran over to Meyer, but Mattson screamed, "Don't touch him!"

Then Sullivan heard a crackling noise, even louder than the machine's whir. The lights flashed and Meyer came flying right off his feet. Like a man shot out of a cannon for an insane circus trick.

Mattson pulled Sullivan back just as the technician crashed through the glass.

He landed at Sullivan's feet.

And then it was dark.

"We've blown the power! How the hell could we have—"

But Sullivan knelt down. He felt around the floor for Meyer's body. His fingers touched the shards of glass. A toothpick-sized piece punctured his skin. Then another. Finally he felt Meyer. He felt the steady rise and fall of the man's chest.

"He's alive!" he shouted at Mattson. "Damn it, he's alive! Call somebody. Do—"

He heard Mattson feeling along the nearby table. Then the chatter of a phone.

"We need a medic down in R and D! And hurry!"

Sullivan heard footsteps, then Turner spoke from outside the room.

"Is he all right?"

"Hal," Sullivan said. "Do you have a flashlight in there?"

Sullivan heard the drawers of a nearby desk being opened. And then Turner's voice—"Got it!"

A click, and a pitifully narrow beam of light escaped from a small flashlight. Turner trained it on Sullivan, then down to Meyer. "Is he okay? Did—" But he stopped.

Sullivan stopped breathing. Everyone stopped breathing . . .

There was sound. A small sound. Movement. From somewhere back near the lab bench. Turner quickly swiveled the light from Meyer back to the smoky blackness of the lab.

"What was that?" Turner said.

He brought the light up. Sullivan saw the outline of the machine, the drill. The prongs were empty.

There was no doll.

"It must have blown the doll away . . . ," Mattson said hollowly.

But even as he said it they all heard more sounds, more little sounds, just like—

Sullivan shook his head. No. It's just my imagination. I'm just all shaken up and—

"Oh, God. Oh, damn!"

It was Turner. He had dropped the flashlight. It clattered to the floor, and for a moment Sullivan thought it would go out.

"Something just stabbed my leg," Turner screamed. "God, I think I'm cut."

Then—from out of the smoky blackness—there was a buzzing noise again, and the lights flashed on. Sullivan blinked at the sudden glare.

The side door to the lab opened up, and two of the factory's medics came running in.

And Sullivan saw what was sitting by the door.

It was the doll.

"What the hell?" Mattson said.

"Go get it," Sullivan said. "Get it now!" he ordered Mattson.

Mattson nodded. He opened the door of the observation room. The broken glass crunched under his feet.

One of the medics went to Turner, while the other kneeled beside Meyer.

Sullivan watched Mattson. He seemed to be walking so slowly over to the doll, which was still sitting on the floor, right by the door. He stopped just in front of it, and then cautiously bent over . . . and picked it up.

Sullivan took a breath . . . and moved out of the observation room, to Mattson, who was turning around, holding the doll. Turning slowly, holding it at arm's length.

All of a sudden it spoke.

"Hi," it sang in that syrupy-sweet voice. The head swiveled left and right. The eyes blinked, once, and then again. "I'm Chucky, and I'm your friend to the end. Hidey-ho, ha-ha-ha!"

Mattson kept holding it away from himself as if it smelled bad.

Sullivan whispered to him. "Not a word of this to anyone, you understand? Not a good goddamn word to *anyone.*" He took Mattson's arm and squeezed it hard, enough to hurt. "You put a lid on this thing, you understand? You smother it. The newspapers will never hear about this, will they?"

Mattson shook his head. Sullivan let go of his arm. "I have to get

ready for my meeting," Sullivan said. He looked over at Turner, who had a blotched red bandage wrapped around his calf. "Are you okay, Hal?"

Hal Turner looked up and nodded. "Yes, but . . ."

"You must have leaned into some glass . . . ," Sullivan said. "Gave you a nasty cut . . ."

Sullivan kept walking toward the door, out of the lab.

"But, Mr. Sullivan," Mattson said. "What should I do with the doll? Will we still test it, or—"

Sullivan stopped, turned, and sneered at Mattson. That damned doll, he thought.

"I don't care what you do with it, Mattson, Just make sure I never, ever see the damn thing again . . ."

Mattson nodded.

And Sullivan left the lab, the electrical smell following him out into the corridor.

He walked to the elevator, shaking his head, thinking, *Hidey-ho indeed!*

3

The man with the bushy beard said, “Got any jacks?”

Andy shook his head. “Go fish.”

“Arrgh,” the man growled. He liked to be called Ted. He told all the kids to call him Ted. But it was hard for Andy to call an adult by his first name, as if he were just another kid or something . . . as if he were like all the other kids in this place.

He wasn’t a kid.

He was something else.

And Andy knew that Ted played games with him only so he could talk to him. Ask him questions. Sometimes the same questions, over and over . . .

“Got any threes?” Andy asked.

“No way, jay.” Ted grinned, scratching at his beard. Then he looked up. He stopped, just holding his cards in front of him, and Andy knew it was “talking time.”

“So how are things going, Andy? Anything happen since we last talked?”

Andy tried hard to avoid Ted’s eyes. They were *so* blue, they could look right through him. Andy looked up from his cards, and then away. Over to the stone wall of the big room, painted with kids chasing a kite, a kitten playing with string, a big yellow sun. The pictures were much bigger than real life, but the colors were faded.

Finally Andy had to turn back, had to meet those eyes. “Mrs. Poole said I might be leaving . . .” Ted nodded. And Andy realized that Ted probably knew more about that than he did. “Yeah,” Andy went on, “just until my mom gets better.”

“Are you excited?”

Andy shrugged. “Sort of . . .”

Ted smiled. A big, happy smile, visible even under his fuzzy beard. “I bet you’re a bit nervous, too.”

Andy shrugged and then nodded. He *was* scared. He didn’t like the idea of living with strangers. He’d be living with some people who would pretend to be his parents. Foster parents, Grace Poole called them.

Only for a while, she said. Just for a while.

But maybe it would be better than here. Not that everyone here

wasn't nice and everything. They were. Real nice, except some of the kids. Some were mean. And others—

Last week a girl came to the center who was all bruised, as if she had fallen down the stairs, over and over. She didn't talk. She just kept looking down at the ground. And there were some mean kids here. Kids who teased Andy. Kids who would jump in his face and scream, "I'm Chucky!" And then they would try to strangle him. And at night—

At night he hated this place. There were the sounds of footsteps in the hall. People moving around, secretively. The sounds scared him. Some of the kids even cried out, screaming. And Andy would wake up and hear those hushed adult voices that scared him so much.

And sometimes—on some nights—he was the one screaming. Calling out for somebody, anybody, to come and help him, to save him from—

"You're a lucky guy," Ted said. "I hear they have some real nice people picked out for you." Andy nodded. "Real nice . . ." He saw Ted look down at his cards, but then Ted tilted his head to one side and looked back at Andy.

"How's the sleeping been going . . . any more nightmares?"

Andy didn't answer for a second. If he talked about it, if he talked about the dreams, they became too real. He might make them happen again. He wanted to forget about them during the day, when he was safe. Forget all about them.

"Sometimes . . . ," he said quietly.

"Want to talk about it?"

Andy shook his head. Then he added, "No."

Ted folded his hand up and held it tight. Andy understood that the game was over, and Ted wanted to do his real work.

"Talking can help, Andy. Talking can make the nightmares go away."

Andy looked away, at the wall with the mural, at a table where another boy was playing a game with another adult. That boy was looking around too. He was being asked questions too.

And Andy looked over his shoulder, at the big mirror behind him, feeling weird, as if—

"You still dreaming about Chucky?"

Ted said his name. And just hearing it made Andy feel sick inside, the same way he had felt that night, watching his mother fight Chucky, trapping the doll in the fireplace.

She had reached out for the matches, looking at Andy.

I have to give them to her, he had thought then. But he just couldn't move.

Until he looked at Chucky, screaming, yelling. Trapped behind the wire mesh in front of the fireplace. He wasn't a Good Guy anymore.

Only when Andy grabbed the matches did the doll's voice change, turning all sweet and nice again. "We're pals," he begged.

We're pals.

In my dreams, Andy thought, Chucky gets out of that fireplace, still burning. And he comes for me, saying, *"We're pals. And now I'm going to get you."*

"I had a dream last night," Andy said. He looked around. "I don't want the other kids to know. They tease me about it . . ."

Ted shook his head. He was very serious now. "I won't tell a soul. Promise." He crossed his heart.

"I had this dream that Chucky got out of the fireplace and came after me . . . just like that night."

Ted smiled. "But you know Chucky's been destroyed, Andy. He's in pieces, all melted. You saw him. You *know* that, Andy."

"Yeah . . . but the bad man inside him is still there. He's still there, inside Chucky. He's killed lots of people and he'd going to come and get me."

Ted moved his chair closer. It made a screeching sound against the linoleum. He was listening hard.

Even though Andy knew he had told this to him before.

I *keep* telling them, he thought. And they never believe me.

"He *has* to get me or else he'll be trapped in the doll. He told me that when he said those words, that strange prayer he said when he held me down." Andy stood up. "Because I was the first person he told his secret to."

Ted reached up and took Andy's hand. "Yes, Andy. I know. But that's . . . that's . . ."

Andy stood still. And he told Ted what he had told him before, what he had told all the others . . .

"He's really Charles Lee Ray, you know, he's really . . ." Andy felt his eyes going puffy. He sniffed and the air burned his nose.

"It was a dream," Ted said soothingly. He tried to get Andy to sit down.

Andy nodded. Then he sat down.

"Yeah. That dream scares me. It always scares me."

And Ted smiled again. "But dreams can't hurt you, can't hurt you at all, Andy. Now can they?"

Again, Andy nodded. “Right.”

Ted fanned open his hand, ready to get back to the game. While Andy thought, Dreams can’t hurt you.

But what if it *isn’t* a dream?

“He’s doing much, much better,” Grace Poole said. She turned back to Joanne and Phil Simpson. “I expect that he’ll do wonderfully with you folks.”

Joanne glanced at her husband. His face showed that he remained unconvinced.

But when Joanne looked out at Andy Barclay, she was thrilled. He was a beautiful boy, with large dark eyes and an intelligent, thoughtful expression. He was just the type of boy she would have liked to have had for her own.

But that was impossible.

She reached over and gave her husband’s hand a squeeze.

Mrs. Poole walked away from the one-way mirror. “He arrived in a terrible state, very traumatized. But he’s young and he’s bounced back marvelously.” The social worker smiled. “Once he’s in a healthy, normal environment, he should do wonderfully.” She focused on Joanne, as if sensing her need, her yearning. “You’ve done so well with the other children you’ve taken in . . .”

“There’s always room for one more,” Joanne said.

But then she felt Phil’s hand pull away from her. He walked closer to the glass, watching Andy talking to the child psychologist. “He seems normal enough . . .” Phil turned back to Mrs. Poole. “But how has all this affected him?”

“He still has dreams, terrible nightmares, usually the same one . . .”

“About the doll?” Joanne said.

“Yes—that it’s coming after him. And,” Grace Poole turned away, “he still maintains that the doll came to life, that it was really this Charles Lee Ray.”

The words made Joanne go cold. Everyone had seen the story in the newspapers. Then came the even more lurid speculation in the tabloids. They had heard about the deaths . . . and the boy who claimed that his doll was the Lakeshore Strangler.

But the Lakeshore Strangler was dead. He was killed inside a toy store, surrounded by a pile of Good Guy dolls. His victims had been part of some sick ritual. The tabloids said it was voodoo. But then those rags weren’t known for their thoughtful analysis.

As for Andy, it was probably just a case of another kid with too

much time in front of the tube. Too much—

“And,” Mrs. Poole went on, “he says that the doll was trying to take his body, that the strangler was trapped in the doll and . . .”

“I don’t know,” Phil said quietly, shaking his head. He put a hand onto the window.

“He’s probably very imaginative,” Joanne offered.

Phil turned around to face her, a cynical grin on his face. “Well, I just *love* a kid with an imagination, don’t you, honey?”

“Phil,” she pleaded. She wanted this boy. She had seen him on other visits, watched him. She could get him out of here, maybe give him some love. It would be good for him, and for her.

Phil’s cruel smile faded and he stepped closer to her. He reached down and took her hands. “I just want to know what we’re getting into, Joanne. I don’t want you, or me, taking on more than we can handle.”

Mrs. Poole cleared her throat. “He’s a lovely boy. Very bright . . . very sweet. But if you think it’s too much then . . .”

Joanne spun around. “No!” she said too loudly. “I mean, we’ve had difficult children before. And Andy doesn’t look like any problem at all.”

She caught Mrs. Poole looking at Phil. And Phil smiled and looked at Joanne.

“Well, I suppose we can help the little guy out. I’m game,” he said, giving Joanne’s hand a squeeze. “If it’s what you want . . .”

Joanne smiled.

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Poole said. “I’ve put a copy of Andy’s records inside a folder, along with the time for his scheduled sessions with Dr. Barlow. It’s very important that he continue to receive support while away from the center.”

Joanne nodded as she went back to the window to watch Andy, who was awkwardly fingering through his cards, searching for the perfect one to go fishing for . . .

They seemed like nice people.

Andy slid into the center seat belt of the big station wagon.

His mom always told him to sit in the center. The center rear seat belt. *Always* . . . It was the safest.

The woman looked a bit like his mom. Except she seemed a little older. She kept turning around and smiling at him. She said he should call her Joanne.

“Yes . . . Joanne,” he said quietly.

The man tossed his bag into the back of the station wagon. He didn't seem as friendly. He was quiet, as if he were thinking about something else.

The heavy doors of the station wagon slammed, and Andy turned to see Mrs. Poole on the steps of the Children's Crisis Center, waving at him.

He never asked her . . . or anyone . . . What's a crisis? Is what happened to me a crisis?

Andy waved back. And the man pulled away.

The woman turned and looked at him. "So, Andy, what do you like to eat?"

"All kinds of things . . . ," he said.

Joanne's smile grew larger. She wants me to talk, he knew. "But what's your very favorite thing, Andy?"

He looked away. The Children's Center was gone. They moved down a big street, through a part of the city Andy had never seen before.

"Chocolate," he said.

The woman's smile fell a bit, and Andy guessed that there might not be much candy to eat in this house. "Besides that?" she asked.

The car burned a corner, moving onto a highway, leaving the tall buildings behind.

"Eggs, I guess. I like eggs."

"Great. We'll make eggs for breakfast."

Home. Your home, Andy thought. Not mine. I have a home. I have a . . .

"I had breakfast," he said.

"Well, I'm sure you'll get hungry," the woman said. "Maybe later . . ."

The man looked back at him, taking his eyes off the road. "Joanne is a terrific cook, Andy. Terrific . . . you like sushi?" Phil smiled when he asked the question.

It's not a real question, Andy knew. It's a joke of some kind. And Andy knew that there was something about this man he didn't like.

And the man looked back again.

"Huh, Andy, do you?"

Andy was looking forward, where the man should have been looking.

And he saw the truck. It was a giant truck, moving over from another lane, moving closer to them, closer, until it was moving right in front of them.

The truck driver didn't see them.

Joanne saw him. She screamed. It was loud. A terrible scream. Just like the scream Andy's mother had made. Over and over. When she screamed at Chucky . . .

"Phil! Look out!"

Phil turned back to the windshield. He yelled, "Jesus Christ!"

That was a bad thing to yell, Andy knew. We're going to hit the truck, he thought. We're going to smash right into the truck. But maybe I'll be okay because I'm in the middle seat belt. Maybe I'll be safe and . . .

The man braked. Andy felt his body fly forward, pulling against the straps. The car screeched to a stop.

The truck kept gliding in front of them. A big truck, taking forever. Andy looked at the side of it.

And he saw the face. The bright red hair. Horribly bright, he thought. And the freckled face and the blue eyes, each as big as a bowling ball.

Another Truck of Good Guys, it said on the side.

The giant face seemed to be looking at Andy as it passed them. The car seemed to tilt, turning, sliding. Then he heard a horn. The truck driver, honking out a warning. And then the truck was past them.

"Damn it," the man said. "That *asshole* nearly killed us . . ."

The woman put a hand on the man's shoulder. "Phil . . . ," she said softly, looking back to Andy.

The man nodded.

"You okay?" the woman said.

"Yes," Andy answered.

"Crazy truck driver," the man said. Then he laughed. "Crazy . . ."

The woman reached back and patted Andy's leg. He liked her. She seemed nice. Like a mom. Even though she wasn't *his* mom.

I have a mom, Andy thought. These people are just taking care of me. Just for now. That's all.

He turned to look to the right. Just in time to see the truck pull off the highway and move through a gate.

He saw buildings and a big sign that said, Play Pals Toys. And there was a giant Good Guy on top of one of the buildings, its big hand going up and down, up and down, waving at everyone as they drove by.

Or maybe, thought Andy, he's waving just at me.

4

They left the city.

Andy watched as rows of beautiful white houses and bright green lawns rolled by. Some of the houses were guarded by big trees planted in front, trees that looked great for climbing. Others were surrounded by walls of bushes. There were no tall buildings here, no buses, no stoplights. It looked quiet, safe . . .

"How's it look, Andy?" Joanne asked.

"Nice," he said, forcing a smile.

The woman was trying so hard to make sure he felt okay.

The car slowed in front of one of the white houses. Then Phil turned left, into a driveway.

"Here we are, champ."

Their house had a lawn and a gigantic front porch. It probably had a backyard, too. A backyard would be good. Andy leaned forward in his seat.

The car stopped. And Joanne turned to him again. "So what do you think?"

"I've never lived in a house before. Just apartments . . ."

"You're going to love it," she said.

Phil opened the back of the station wagon, getting his bag. And then he opened Andy's door while Andy undid his seat belt.

Andy looked up at the house, at the windows, wondering, Which room is mine?

Joanne took his hand. It felt funny at first, but he held on as she led him along. She turned to her husband.

And Andy heard her say, "A house just isn't a home without children."

But Phil didn't say anything.

As Andy walked up the steps to the front door, he saw that everything was shiny and new-looking—the porch, the floor, the windows—everything was bright with fresh white paint. It was all so different from the dark building where he lived with his mother.

Joanne opened the door. It slid open soundlessly.

And Andy thought about another door . . .

Chucky was after them. The policeman had been hurt. And they were alone again, he and his mom, running around the house, being chased by Chucky.

Only Andy knew it wasn't Chucky any longer. He knew it was someone else—someone hiding in the doll.

And that someone had a special knife. With strange swirls of red and black on it. It looked like an Indian knife from the museum. It had a wet red blotch at the tip.

From the policeman.

Except Chucky didn't want the policeman. The policeman had just gotten in the way.

Chucky kept yelling in that horrible voice.

"Give me the boy! Give me the . . ."

He used the F-word. And his voice was terrible. It was a monster's voice.

He screamed, "If you give me the boy, I'll let you go. Just give me the boy!"

Mom pulled Andy into the bathroom and slammed the door, holding it tight against Chucky.

And Andy remembered thinking, He'll never get in. He's only a doll. And it's a nice strong door and my mom is right here, holding it shut tight.

Then the knife came slicing through the wood.

Again. And again. Jabbing at his mother. She screamed, trying to move, trying not to get cut. Until the door was filled with holes.

And Chucky just kept screaming . . . "Give me the boy! Give him to me and I'll let you go!"

But she didn't, Andy thought . . . as he walked through the door of the Simpson house.

Phil put down Andy's suitcase in a dark hallway. Andy saw a big, open room to his left, filled with light. There were stairs just ahead . . . and he smelled food, different, strange aromas. That reminded him of going up in the elevator in his apartment building and smelling what everyone was making for dinner.

This isn't *my* home, Andy thought.

"There you go, champ," Phil said. "Take a look around while we hang up the coats."

They watched him—he felt them watching him. He looked left again, at the big, open living room filled with light. He took a step inside. Everything was beautiful—the couch with its pillows sitting

neatly in the corner and the dark wood tables that reflected the sunlight. Everything was so clean, so shiny.

He turned a bit and saw a table. It had a statue on it. He walked over to the statue.

It was of a mother holding a baby. Andy leaned down close to it, to get a better look at the face of the woman. She was smiling at the baby, and the baby was looking back at her. Andy reached out to touch the statue, to touch the woman . . .

Then Phil's hand closed around his wrist.

"Oops, sorry, Andy. That's a *very* valuable piece. It's a hobby of ours, collecting things, figurines . . ."

Andy looked around, and he saw, for the first time, the other statues dotting the room. Funny, at first he had only seen this one.

"So," Phil went on. "First rule—don't touch the old stuff. Okay, champ?"

Andy nodded. Then Joanne was there. "Sorry," Andy said quietly. He looked up at her.

"No foul," Phil said, patting his shoulder. "You don't go into the penalty box this time." Andy didn't know what he was talking about. "You just gotta be a bit careful in this room."

The woman came close to Andy, and then she picked up the statue. She turned it in her hands, letting Andy see it.

"My grandmother gave this to my mother," she said. "And . . . my mother gave it to me."

Andy turned to Joanne. "And who will you give it to?"

The statue stopped turning. Andy watched the woman's face change. She opened her mouth as if she were going to say something. But then she just put the statue down, as if it were no longer important.

Andy knew he'd said something wrong.

Joanne took his hand. "Come on. Let's go get your suitcase and get you all settled in. Does that sound like a good idea?"

"Sure," Andy said, and he let himself be led out of the living room. When they got to the stairs, the woman said, "Why don't you go on and take your bag upstairs? I'll be right up."

Andy reached down, picked up his small suitcase, and walked upstairs . . . noting how his feet made no sound on the thickly carpeted steps.

Joanne put her arm around Phil and pulled him close.

"He's absolutely darling," she whispered, watching Andy walk up

the stairs. “He feels so fragile, lost . . .” She turned and looked right at Phil’s face. “What do you think?”

Phil smiled. “I think I’ll get used to him.”

And she felt him give her a squeeze back.

It is dark up here, Andy thought. The only light came from a window at the end of the hall. And there were a lot of doors up here, a lot of rooms. How can I tell which is mine?

He turned around to ask them where he should go. But he saw them talking quietly, whispering. They are probably talking about me, he guessed. Maybe they’re not so happy they brought me here. Maybe it would have been better if I had stayed at the center. Even though the other children screamed, even though there were children with hurt faces, even though there were mean kids who made him feel bad.

Maybe that might have been better.

He looked at the nearest door. Maybe this is my room, he thought. He walked over to the door and twisted the knob. As soon as the door was open, his nose wrinkled.

Smoke. Then someone complained, “Jee-zuz. Didn’t you ever hear of knocking?”

He could see a big girl inside. A teenager. She was sitting on her bed flipping through a magazine. A pale blue cloud of cigarette smoke hung in the room. There was a poster over her bed of some man with long black hair, dressed all in black, except for one hand. That was curled into a fist and covered with shiny metal spikes. Andy tried to read the words on the poster, but the lettering was strange.

He didn’t like the picture.

“I’m s—” he started to say.

“Forget it,” the girl said quickly. “Just close the door and . . .”

Then Joanne was there, just behind him in the doorway. “Andy, did you find . . . ?”

He felt the woman move him to the side-out of the way. “Kyle, what’s this? You’ve been smoking again. Hey, you *know* the rules.”

Joanne walked past Andy right up to the girl. “Okay, hand them over. *Now.”*

The girl rolled her eyes. She shot Andy a look, and he knew she blamed him . . . for opening the door . . . for getting her in trouble.

“Oh, Joanne, come on. They’re my lungs . . . Why don’t you . . .”

“Give ’em!” Joanne said, putting out her hand. “Phil will kill you if he finds you with cigarettes again.”

The girl shook her head and rolled her eyes at Andy a second time.

But then she dug in her shirt pocket and pulled out a red-and-white box. She slapped it into the woman's hand.

"Thank you." Joanne turned to Andy, as if she had forgotten him. "Andy, this is Kyle. You can think of her as your sister while you're here."

Kyle glared at Andy and then made a sick-looking smile. "Charmed."

Andy stepped a bit back, moving out of Kyle's room. She was pretty, but with her short hair, red, made-up lips, and dark eyes lined in black, she looked as if she could be as mean as some of the kids in the center.

Maybe even meaner.

"Kyle," Joanne said, walking over to her chest of drawers. There was a pink suitcase sitting on top of it. "Kyle, what is this? You've been here for three weeks and you still haven't unpacked. What in the world . . ."

Kyle stood up. When she got off the bed, Andy saw a stuffed bear roll off it, a brown bear with a red ribbon around its neck. The bear landed face-down, and he saw the girl try to kick it away. As if she didn't want anyone to see it was hers.

"Why should I unpack? What for? I'm never in one place for more than a month. Never. I'm *always* going somewhere new." Kyle took a step toward Joanne. "So why should I unpack?"

Joanne shook her head. She moved away from the suitcase, from Kyle. "Well, with that kind of attitude, I can see why. We like having you stay with us. But I'd like it better if you put your stuff away."

The girl nodded. She looked down at Andy, catching him watching her.

Andy suddenly realized: I'm the new kid. She thinks that I'm just like her. But I've got a *real* mother, he thought. Someone who will come and get me. This girl couldn't have a real mother. She couldn't.

Joanne stood by Andy again. "And I'd appreciate a hand with dinner. I have to get Andy settled and . . ."

"I can't. I have to work tonight."

"Work? Again? You've been out three nights in a row. This is supposed to be a family, Kyle. I mean, it's nice you can earn some spending money. But it would also be nice if you spent some time with us."

"Yeah, well, I have a job, and I'm saving money because next year I'm going to be on my own."

Joanne kept steering Andy out of the room.

"That may be, Kyle. But until then, I'd appreciate some help around

here.”

“Er, sure.” Kyle seemed to agree. Too quickly, Andy thought. Then Kyle smiled, and all of a sudden she didn’t look so mean. “Joanne, can I borrow the car tonight? It takes forever on the bus and . . .”

“The keys are on my dresser,” Joanne said. It was the same tone of voice Andy’s mom had used when she would finally give in and let him have that extra cookie.

“Thanks,” Kyle said.

As soon as they were out of Kyle’s room, her door shut again.

Joanne looked down at Andy. “She’s okay . . . really,” she said, smiling.

Andy smiled back.

But he wasn’t sure about that at all.

5

“Just don’t give me any runaround on this, all right? Can you just tell me that I don’t have to worry about a thing?”

Boyd Mattson squeezed the phone, wishing it was the custodian’s neck. The head custodian was making lots of noise about the mess, how he would have to pull men off their regular rotation, maybe put some guys on overtime, maybe even a few on *golden time.*

The bastard was mining the situation for all it was worth.

And he would start asking nervous questions about that machine, the giant drill that nearly killed Meyer and practically blew the whole lab up.

“What should I do with that?” he wanted to know.

Mr. Sullivan wanted the mess cleaned up. All of it. Mattson guessed that Sullivan wanted all signs of the “incident” removed, and that probably included the drill. Hell, it was probably damaged beyond repair anyway.

But Mattson didn’t want to take responsibility if it wasn’t.

“Look,” he said to the custodial foreman, “just haul it out back and . . .”

“Too big,” the guy said. “Too damn big to be moved through the lab doors.”

“Then break it into sections. But try not to just trash the thing. Maybe someone will want to look at it, maybe someone will want to salvage it.”

There was a pause, and Mattson knew this man and his crew could be . . . what?

A potential source of problems.

The reporters had stopped sniffing around Play Pals Toys. The company had effectively closed ranks, and the scandalmongers had come up with nothing.

But these guys, the custodians, were the bottom of the food chain here in Play Pals. They were probably open to offers of easy money. Pass them a hundred bucks and ask them anything. What really went on with that doll? And—take another fin, pal—anything else bizarro going on in there?

Yeah. We had a lab explode. They were working on a Good Guy doll . . .

The crew chief finally spoke. “Sure, Mr. Mattson,” he said. “Sure. No problem. I’ll take care of everything. May take a bit of time—heh, heh. But don’t you worry about a thing.”

Not a thing.

“Good,” Mattson said, and he put the phone down.

He leaned back in his chair and looked to the side, to the cabinet, to the top of the cabinet.

Where the repaired doll sat.

His first idea had been to drag the damn doll right down to their massive incinerator. It was a giant industrial monster that gobbled up tons of plastic and metal sprue each week, environmentally superheating the stuff into a thick resin. Some of it would be recycled; some of it would be carried away to the next wonderful landfill. Where some sleazoid developer would put a sign on the too-green grass: If You Lived Here, You’d Be Home By Now!

If you didn’t mind a little leukemia in the family.

Mattson looked at the doll. Sullivan had ordered him to get rid of it.

But what did that mean exactly? Destroy it?

Possibly. But what if something happened later? Yeah, what if there were *more* questions, *more* investigations? And Sullivan came back and said, Boyd, where’s the doll? What did he do with the doll?

Well, wouldn’t that be nice? Old Boyd would be hung out on the line to dry, his ass in the wringer. I melted him, Mr. Sullivan. I thought . . .

Yeah, he could see that scenario very clearly. Sullivan would have his rear covered while Mattson took the heat.

Mattson glared at the doll. It didn’t look all that much different from any other Good Guy. Mattson and nearly everyone else in the company was sick of that face. It was everywhere—on lunch boxes, coveralls, tiny tool kits, even sneaker laces. And every day Mattson drove to the factory, he passed that giant Good Guy, who kept waving at him.

The sick red hair, the freckles gone crazy on the chubby-cheeked face. All Mattson had to do now was just look at a Good Guy and he lost his appetite.

This one didn’t look any different from the hundreds of thousands of others, even if it was reconstructed. Oh, it was a bit off here and there. The hair had obviously just been slapped on, and quickly stapled to the head. And the face and eyes didn’t line up perfectly. In fact, the eyes looked almost recessed.

He got up from his desk.

No, he couldn’t get rid of the thing. That would be stupid . . . real

dumb.

He reached out and picked up the doll.

“Mr. Sullivan wants you out of sight,” Mattson said to the air.

He waited. As if the doll would suddenly spring to life.

But it just stayed there, in his hands, staring out into space.

Just a piece of plastic and metal.

Mattson shook his head. The police should be watching that kid, Mattson thought. Andy Barclay, the brat who said the doll had come to life, that the doll was really Charles Lee Ray. Yeah, he’s the one I’d be watching.

Mattson put down the Good Guy.

Because, he thought, that kid’s gotta be one mighty sick puppy.

“Like it?”

Andy looked around the room. It was a lot bigger than his bedroom at home. It had two windows that let lots of light in. He liked that. The curtains and the wallpaper were both a pale blue, and the rug was a deep sea blue. He liked that too.

There were some posters . . . the Chicago Cubs, the Chicago Bears. It was a nice room.

“It’s neat,” Andy said.

He saw a chest of some kind at the foot of the bed. He walked over to it.

“You like blue?” Joanne said.

Andy nodded. He knelt down before the chest and opened the lid. It was filled with toys! G.I. Joe figures and Cobra’s War Wagon—something he had always wanted. He pawed through the pile. Underneath were more G.I. Joe soldiers, a missile launcher, and—he couldn’t believe it—a Micro-Machine Aircraft Carrier.

“Wow!” he said.

“I thought you’d like that.”

Things were definitely looking better now, he thought. This was like finding a secret treasure chest crammed with neat toys.

But then, as he dug out the Joe Team’s missile launcher, he remembered his last birthday.

Mom never had much money. It was hard for her to buy clothes for him *and* toys. She worked real hard at the store, working overtime.

She had worked late the night she brought him Chucky. Aunt Maggie, really just her mom’s best friend, had been watching him. Aunt Maggie was fun.

But she didn't believe that Chucky was talking to him. She didn't believe him when he told her that Chucky wanted to watch the news. Then, when he told her it was Chucky who had turned on the TV . . .

She didn't believe him.

Chucky said she was stupid. And then . . .

"Andy . . . are you okay, you . . . ?"

He turned back to Joanne and nodded, still holding the missile launcher. He had forgotten about it for a second.

"There's more stuff in the closet," Joanne said, putting his clothes into the dresser, smiling at him.

Andy got up and went to the closet. There were stacks of puzzles on the floor. Andy didn't like puzzles. They were too hard. He could never see where the pieces fit together. There were lots of puzzles, and Andy decided that there must have been lots of kids who had stayed here. Lots.

I'm just one more.

But that's okay, he thought. I don't want to stay here. Mom will come and get me.

Then he looked up. There were more toys piled up on the high shelf. He saw a big red truck and other toys hidden behind it.

Andy reached up, stretching on his tiptoes. His fingers didn't seem to reach, but then—with just a bit more stretching—he touched metal.

"We may have to get you some more clothes, Andy. I don't think you have enough here for school and . . ."

One finger hooked the back of the truck and he tugged on it, pulling it down.

He fell back on his heels as the truck started falling down. It was tumbling right toward Andy. The truck was big and aiming right for his head.

He spun away.

And when he looked back, he saw something else, right beside the truck. It landed at his feet with a heavy thud.

It was a Good Guy doll.

He crawled away from it, pushing at the ground with his feet and hands. He made a sound. A cry. He wasn't sure.

"Andy," Joanne said. "Are you all right? Are you?"

The Good Guy doll was smiling at him. It looked just like Chucky. Just like him. There was no difference.

And he thought, Maybe it is Chucky. Maybe it *is* Chucky, hiding in the closet, waiting to get me.

"Hey, gang, how are we doing here? Everything . . ."

Andy looked up at Phil, who had just stuck his head in the doorway. Then Andy looked quickly back at the doll, waiting for it to move, waiting for it to get up and start coming for him.

Got you now, Andy Barclay. Right here. In this nice house. Got you now! And these people are going to help me!

“Oh, Andy, I’m sorry. I forgot all about *that*. The last little boy we had played with it. We just stuck it up there.”

Joanne picked the doll up. Andy wanted to tell her, Don’t touch it. Put it down. He can hurt you, real bad.

Put it down!

She stood there, looking down at Andy while she held the doll in her hands.

Just a doll.

“I’ll get rid of it, Andy. I’m sorry I forgot about it. I’ll just . . .”

Andy stood up. Phil stepped into the room and Andy looked up at him quickly. He saw the look on Phil’s face. It was the same look he had worn before. A look that said he wasn’t too sure about this whole arrangement. It said, Maybe we don’t want Andy staying here.

All of a sudden, Andy didn’t care anymore about all the neat toys.

Phil took another step. “Are you okay?” he asked Andy.

Phil’s watching me, Andy thought. He’s watching me. Watching to see what I do . . . what I say.

Andy looked back at the doll. Chucky is gone, he told himself. Chucky is dead.

Andy reached out and touched the doll. He rubbed the doll’s arms, feeling the material of the striped T-shirt, and then the corduroy overalls.

I had overalls like that, Andy thought. Good Guy overalls.

“That’s okay,” he said quietly.

His hand went back to the arm and closed around it. He told himself, Chucky was burned to a crisp. Chucky was shot through the heart. It’s all over. And this is . . . this is . . .

“It’s only a doll,” he said, smiling, looking from Phil to Joanne. “Only a doll,” he repeated. “Right?”

Phil smiled. And Andy knew that something bad had moved away, like a cloud drifting past the sun. Phil smiled back and said, “Er, yeah, Andy. Right.”

Andy held the doll by the arm. But not too close. He saw that Phil was looking at Joanne.

They’ll go downstairs and talk about me again, Andy knew. Everyone wants to talk about me.

Nobody wants to believe me.

"Well, you have some fun and play, okay?" Joanne said. "And I'll get some dinner started."

"Okay," Andy said, smiling up at Joanne.

She took Phil's arm and walked out of the room. And Andy stood there. The doll in his hands. It was as if he were frozen, as if he couldn't move. He heard them walking down the stairs, their steps muffled on the thick carpet. He waited until he couldn't hear them anymore.

And then—very slowly—he brought the doll up and around. At arm's length. Holding it right in front of him.

The doll smiled at him. It always smiled.

Except when it was Chucky.

"Just a doll . . . ," he said quietly. "Just a—"

The doll blinked its eyes.

Andy moaned. He wanted to drop it, let it fall to the ground.

But he was frozen.

The doll's head turned left and right, as if searching for him.

"Hi, I'm Tommy!" it squealed, the sound *so loud,* too loud. "And I'm your friend to the end. Hidey-ho, ha-ha-ha!"

Andy held the doll, shaking. It was laughing at him. And he knew it would say something else. Maybe, "Want to play?" or "I like to be hugged!"

And Andy didn't want to hear anything else.

He ran over to the open toy chest and threw the doll in. He threw it hard. He wanted to hear the big plastic head smack against some toys. He watched the doll crash down. The eyes blinked.

Andy slammed down the lid.

The thunder rumbled from out of nowhere. Mattson heard the slow roar as he got his disorganized briefcase together and started for his car. He carried the doll by its left foot, dangling it behind him.

Shit, he thought. It's going to rain. I hate driving my new BMW in the rain. There are too many stupid drivers who could rear-end me or sideswipe the car. The Beammer handled great in the rain, but he just worried about all the other peasants in their Escorts.

The thunder seemed louder the closer he got to the exit of the building. The parking lot was empty. He had hoped to get out early, but the fun time in the lab put the kabosh on *that* plan.

Now his BMW was the only car left in the executive parking lot.

Then—as he stood there—a jagged streak of lightning sailed over

the Play Pals building. And—as if someone had turned on a tap just for his benefit—the rain started to come down.

"Damn it," he muttered. He popped open his briefcase and took out a small umbrella. It was a Good Guy umbrella. But as soon as he popped it open it collapsed into total uselessness.

Some quality workmanship there, he thought.

He looked at the rain, coming down harder with each second. It was a god-damned downpour.

He pulled his trenchcoat collar up against the weather, and held his sleek Verdi calfskin attaché tight to his body—he didn't want that ruined. He took a breath, and letting the doll drag behind him, he ran out to brave the storm.

Already there were oily puddles. He jumped over them, and he heard the doll's head thwap against the asphalt. The red hair was getting splattered with the dirty water.

He kept running and tried to dig his keys out of his pocket while still holding onto Chucky. There was another streak of lightning, then a thunderous belch from the clouds. The eye of the storm had to be just overhead. The doll's foot slipped through his arm as he wedged it there, and it fell into a puddle.

Face-down, right into the water.

"Shit," Mattson said again. He got his keys and then scooped up the now-sopping doll. No matter, he thought. He was just taking it for insurance. It was no big deal. Not at all . . .

He got to the car and worked the key in the trunk. It popped open with an impressive whoosh. And two small trunk lights showed him that there wasn't a lot of room back there.

The trunk was filled with Play Pals toys. Samples from trade shows, freebies that he passed on to his brother's kids, and games that he wanted to check out. There was a box with about a half-dozen Good Guy Nintendo games, worth their weight in gold.

He tossed the doll onto the heap. Another flash of lightning made the doll's face glow eerily atop the pile, as if it were sitting on a mound of dead bodies. Mattson slammed the trunk down.

But it bounced back open.

Damn, he thought. I'm getting wetter by the second. He put the attaché on the wet ground and slammed the lid down again.

This time he heard a crunch.

He smashed it down again.

But it still wouldn't close . . .

It was pain.

No doubt about it.

He wanted to scream out, to jump up and rip the throat open of this asshole.

Pain.

But he forced himself to be still. As—there!—the hood came down again, and he watched it slam on his fingers.

I could move my hand, he thought. He wouldn't see; he's just an asshole.

But no. It was too big a risk, too big—Slam! It smashed down again across his fingers.

Oh, he thought, pain. Horrible, horrible pain.

The trunk lid bounced open again.

Despite the pain, he thought, this is better.

Yes, it was much better to have this . . . to have this terrible feeling rather than the nothingness.

I've been given a second chance.

A second chance.

Praise Damballa. Mighty Damballa who rules over life and death. All praise and honor—

I've been given a second chance.

The man stopped banging the trunk.

A second chance.

To escape the doll.

And live again!

6

What the hell? Mattson thought.

He smashed the lid down again, jostling the doll's body, trying to make some room, until—

He saw the problem.

The doll's arm was flung to the side, and the doll's fingers were extended out, blocking the lid. Mattson saw that one finger was completely smashed.

"Oh, hell," he said. He snatched the doll off the pile and slammed the trunk down.

He held the doll by its broken hand. The hand felt wet and slimy. From the rain, Mattson guessed. That's just how the plastic feels when it gets wet. Like lizard skin. Slimy, scaly—

He opened the rear door of the BMW. The backseat was filled with toys, too, some of them prototypes, others just samples that had somehow ended up in his new car.

I have to do something about this mess, he thought. He tossed the doll into the back. He hurried to open the front door and get in. Some thunder cracked right near his head. Got to get in the car, he thought. That's where it's safe in electrical storms. What a night . . .

The car started up with the speed of a precision piece of Deutschland craftsmanship. They may have lost the war, but they sure knew how to make an automobile.

Mattson pulled out of the deserted parking lot, the storm raging around him. He adjusted the speed of the BMW's windshield wipers so that it kept pace with the sheets of water that cascaded in front of him.

"What a night . . ." he said out loud.

He adjusted the rearview mirror. He saw the doll, lying stupidly on top of the pile of toys, near the slinkies, the Good Guy water pistols, the Good Guy Science Lab, the Good Guy Play Dough.

He pulled out onto Wacker Street, turning left toward Wabash. He looked at his dash, a Christmas tree of idiot lights—speed, temperature, battery, fuel. Very pretty. He saw his phone. He wondered whether he could get a good connection in this weather. He reached out and picked it up.

Thinking of the night ahead. Enjoying the guilt, the deceit, the thrill

—

He punched in his home number.

It rang, clearly, nice and loud. Mattson was impressed by the sound on the cellular phone. It rang once, twice, and then someone was there . . .

The pain had stopped, but his fingers throbbed. He wondered whether they were still there. They're only plastic and metal, he thought. So it's no big deal. Just a temporary problem. He could see the back of the man's head. The asshole had picked up a phone. He was concentrating on driving and dialing.

He's not watching me, he thought. I can move now.

He sent messages to his doll body. Move. Turn. It felt weird. Not as if it was his body. He had to think about it, picture it. The head turned. And he saw his crushed fingers. He saw the gloppy mess oozing out of the fingers.

And Charles Lee Ray thought, I'm bleeding. I'm damn well bleeding! Dolls don't damn well bleed!

And that scared him. Not because he was hurt. Not because he was losing blood—from a doll!—but because of what it all meant.

If I'm bleeding, he thought, I'm changing again. Time is running out for me. What did the old priest say? The *gris-gris* works quickly. The longer I'm in the body, the more it becomes me. Until I'll never get the hell out—

Unless I get the kid.

And say the words. The prayer to Damballa, the chant, calling on his power.

It had to be that kid, the first one he told his secret to.

And I'll be seven years old! Seven again.

He thought of all the wonderful things he could do, the things a kid could get away with. The way he could plan for when he was older. He thought of the mistakes he wouldn't make.

Chucky looked at his mashed fingers, the pool of blood gathering on the toy guns, the slinkies, the other toys.

I gotta get moving, he thought.

He moved his head back to look at the guy driving. The plastic skin on his skull pulled, making little clicking noises. But the guy was talking on the phone . . .

"Hi, honey," Mattson sang. "Hey, what a night, huh?" Susan, his wife, sounded guarded. She knows what's coming, Mattson thought. She's

been through the routine before.

"Honey, don't hold dinner, okay? Sullivan wants me working late again. There was a problem in the lab this morning."

She whined at him. He heard the kids playing in the background, whooping it up, making a lot of noise. He felt a smidgeon of guilt.

Not enough, though. "Hey, Sue, I *know* I promised . . . but what can I tell you? They give me the big bucks and I have to be there."

She mumbled something that sounded like "Okay."

"That's a girl. Give everyone a kiss and I'll see you later."

Mattson smooched the phone and then pressed Disconnect—

Just as some thunder roared near him.

"Jesus!" he said.

"Now for call number two," he went on. And he felt a smile bloom on his face . . . and a warmth in his crotch that never failed to appear when he was going to see Lisa . . .

Her phone rang four times—a small wave of anxiety—before she picked up. "Hello, Lisa," he said. "I'm about ten minutes away, babe . . ."

She told him she was ready, and that dinner—Steak Diane—was in the oven. She also told him what she was wearing. And what she wasn't wearing.

He took a breath. "Nice. So—"

She reminded him about bringing champagne.

"The champagne. Oh yeah . . . No, I didn't forget it. Hey, it's our two-week anniversary. I want to celebrate . . . I'm on my way. Ciao."

He pressed Disconnect. Shit. Champagne. Now I'll have to stop in this deluge. It was like a hurricane outside. He didn't even have an umbrella.

Just then he entered the tunnel that took him toward Lakeshore Drive . . .

Chucky saw the tunnel. The pale white lights, a smoky blue. He heard the man hang up his phone.

And Chucky thought about sitting up. After all, this was a new body. It wasn't his old doll's body. It was new. What if it didn't work?

The car flew into the tunnel. The pounding of the rain stopped.

And Chucky sat up. He could see the driver squinting, looking ahead. He'll see me in the rearview mirror, Chucky thought.

Chucky pushed with his new legs against the toy pile, moving himself closer to the back of the driver's seat, while all the time crouching down . . . just below the driver's headrest . . .

The girl, Kyle, hadn't been there for dinner. She had gone out. She worked, they said. So it was just the three of them. Andy liked that.

The food was okay, too, a big plate of spaghetti that he could drown in sauce. He ate one meatball, and finding that it tasted okay, he tried another.

Phil and Joanne smiled at him while he ate. They like me, Andy thought. That's pretty good. They like me. This is a lot better than the center.

After dinner, Joanne made him take a bath. That was okay. Andy liked playing with the G.I. Joe stuff in the tub. He made them jump off the cliff of the faucet into the mountains of bubbles. After his bath, he wore his pajamas, the new ones without feet. And Joanne read him a story by his bed.

She didn't read as good as his mom. But it still felt pretty good.

She kissed him on his cheek and said, "Good night, Andy."

As she went to close the door he said, "Stop . . ." Too loudly, he knew.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"I like to sleep with the door open. I like the door *open* when I sleep."

She nodded and said, "Sure. Can I close it halfway?"

"Okay," Andy said. I got to sound more chipper, he thought. Be a good trooper, like Mom always said I should be when I went to the doctor for shots. Got to be a good trooper. "Good night," he said.

Joanne answered him and then left.

And only then did Andy think about the toy chest at the foot of the bed.

He thought about the toy chest—but not about all the neat toys inside. He thought of the Good Guy doll, lying face down on top of them. As if standing guard.

And it took him a long time to finally fall asleep . . .

He was asleep.

Of course he was. For a moment, in his dream, he was back at the apartment, waking up in the morning. Hearing his mom make the coffee grinder whine. Hearing the refrigerator door pop open and then slide shut. The clatter of cereal bowls. The tinkling sound of Captain Crunch—his favorite!—tumbling into the bowl. The smell of an English Muffin in the toaster.

Except—even in his dream—he knew that he wasn't in the apartment.

Then—like all dreams—it vanished, and he was in this new house and—

And it was dark.

He had a thought then: This isn't a dream. This is happening. It only seems like a dream. But this is real, real! And—

He lay on the strange bed. With its too-clean sheets and its blanket that didn't feel comfortable. Someone else's blanket. A stranger's blanket. He held it tight around his neck.

Listening.

There had been voices from downstairs, but now it was quiet. Very quiet.

There weren't even any sounds from outside, from the streets. No sirens like the ones he used to hear. No noisy cars growling on the road. There was nothing. Just his breathing and—

There! He heard something. A tiny shuffling. Things moving. A tiny, muffled bell sound.

A toy. A toy inside the toy chest. Something with a bell. Maybe a pull-toy. Maybe a yellow duck on a string that you pull and it quacks and there's a bell. Quack. Ding. Quack. Ding.

He had had one of those once. Then it lost a wheel.

That was when his father left.

Disappeared.

He disappeared. That's what happens when someone just is there one day and gone the next. His duck lost a wheel, and then it wouldn't quack anymore.

He clutched the blanket tighter, feeling where the satin-smooth edging gave way to a rough, scratchy cloth. He held it tight, almost pressing it against his neck.

More sounds. Something shifting. Just there, just at the foot of the bed. Inside the toy chest.

He looked at the door.

It had been opened just a bit when he went to bed. Now it was closed tight. And—with no light on in the hall-invisible. It had been open. Now it was shut.

And now he was convinced this wasn't a dream.

They shut the door, Andy thought. After I went to bed, they came and shut the door. I can't even see the door. There might not even be a door—

He heard a creak.

Then louder, another creaking sound, growing louder and louder.

The lid—the toy chest lid—was opening up.

He brought the blanket up a bit more, right up to his chin now. He chewed his lip.

But when he tugged the blanket, he felt his feet pop out. They popped out, uncovered, at the bottom of the bed. Right near the toy chest.

He's opening it, Andy thought.

Tommy. The doll. He's opening it. He's a friend of Chucky's. And he's coming out to get me!

Andy sat up in bed, still holding the blanket tightly. He tucked his feet under him, under the safety of the blanket.

It was so dark in there. Almost black. He looked again for the door. But he couldn't see it.

I could run for it, he thought. I could get up and run where I think the door is. I could grab the handle and run outside and scream and get—

He looked back.

There was a tiny bit of light coming in from the window. Just the slightest bit of light. It's not so black there, he thought. And he saw something catch that light. Catch it with a dull glow.

It moved.

The toy chest lid was open.

Andy moaned. "No," he said.

He edged his legs closer to one side of the bed. I can run, he thought. I can run and beat it.

Closer, until now his feet again snaked out from under the blanket, ready for his quick dash to the door.

He kept watching the now-open lid. Something moved along the open lid, moved along the shiny parts, covering them. And Andy thought he saw stripes.

Of course he'd see stripes. He had to see stripes.

And then something big and dark, all in the shadow. Clicking sounds. Movement. "No!" Andy cried.

And he felt, for the first time, the tears on his cheeks, tears he hadn't even known he was crying. He moved his legs all the way to the side, throwing off the heavy blanket, knowing he had to run.

Then a hand closed around his ankle.

A tiny hand. A strong hand. And the voice came from down below, at the foot of the bed. "I like to be hugged!"

Andy tumbled to the floor, his ankle still held. As the doll dragged him back inside the toy chest . . .

7

If anything, it was raining harder. And when Mattson finally got to Big Ray's Liquors, there were no parking spots near the door.

He hated leaving his precious BMW parked out of sight. Hated it almost as much as he hated getting wet.

But then he thought of Lisa, and the champagne, and the candlelight . . . and the two of them rolling around on her cheap shag rug while a Duraflame log burned in her fireplace.

Yes, I'll be cozy and warm soon . . . he thought.

He picked a spot two spaces removed from a beat-up pickup truck. Mattson always suspected low-life scum of getting a secret pleasure from smashing the doors of their pickups into luxury cars. The common jerk's revenge . . . Park defensively, that was Mattson's motto.

He jumped out into the maelstrom. The lightning seemed to have eased, but the rain was still pouring down as if from a faucet. Mattson had to stop outside, water streaming down his face, and turn the key counterclockwise, setting the autotheft alarm. He barely heard the discreet beep that signaled the system was engaged.

Then he ran into the store, his feet stepping into every invisible puddle . . .

* * *

Chucky stood up on the pile of toys. And he leaned forward, reaching around to the passenger seat in the front.

Let's see if this is my lucky day, he thought.

And one of his doll hands, stupid hands that he could barely close, flopped around the seat for a moment before he—aha!—felt the attaché case. He found the handle and then pulled the case back.

Maybe the asshole locked it, he thought.

But he found the latches and they popped open. And there, as he had suspected, was a file on his best pal. Someone who he was going to get to know very well. Intimately . . .

He opened Andy Barclay's folder. He saw a picture of the boy. Not a bad-looking kid. I should do all right with that face, he thought. Not bad at all. And with what I know, I should be a millionaire by the time I'm eighteen.

Chucky grinned.

He found a single, typewritten sheet. He saw Andy's old address, the apartment building he lived in with his bitch-mother. (I'll fix her some day, he thought. No question about it. She and I have a date with destiny!) But Andy wasn't living there anymore.

No, the paper said he was at someplace called the Glencoe Children's Crisis Center.

Chucky grinned at that. Damn right, he's got a crisis.

There was a phone number. He mumbled it to himself. "276-7783 . . ."

Just then something plopped onto the paper, right on Andy's name.

It fell from his doll finger, Chucky saw. It was blood, from his finger.

"No," he groaned. Goddamn, I'm running out of time, he thought. I'm running out of time!

He threw the papers aside and crawled between the bucket seats. His body nearly got stuck, but he grunted and squeezed through.

Leaning on the dash, he could see the liquor store. He saw Mattson waiting on line, holding a bottle. There was still time, plenty of time. Chucky picked up the cellular phone.

He dialed the number. But he heard nothing. Shit, he thought. How the hell does this thing work? What if I need the keys? Maybe it won't work without the car engine running . . .

Then he let his doll fingers search the surface of the phone, feeling the buttons while he held the phone up, trying to see if he was missing anything.

He saw a switch on the side. He flicked it up and he heard a dial tone. Or something very much like a dial tone.

He tried the number again. And it rang! He smiled. He felt his plastic cheeks move ever so slightly. (I gotta get out of this body!)

And he thought, It's time to reach out and touch someone.

Grace Poole had Sammy sitting right next to her, right next to the copy machine. She had hoped to get caught up on some paperwork. But the thunder had scared Sammy and he insisted on seeing Grace. And then staying with her.

The children clasp on to anyone they think they can trust, Grace thought. And they hold on.

She looked over at him.

"Sammy, I think you should get back to bed now, honey. The thunder's all gone and—"

He shook his head. He waved his floppy-eared rabbit as he talked. “I’m still scared,” he said matter-of-factly.

Grace Poole nodded. She stuck another sheet into the copier. “But there’s nothing to be scared of, sweetie. Nothing at all. It’s just a storm and the worst is—”

The phone rang. Sammy jumped.

The noise startled Grace too. She quickly smiled at him. If she was going to get home tonight, she had to get Sammy calmed down and back inside the dorm.

She ran over to the phone, catching it in midring.

“Hello, Boys’ Dormitory, Glencoe . . .”

She saw Sammy stand up, right beside the copy machine. The boy hit the recessed controls, and when her copies should have stopped, they started coming out twice as fast.

The connection was weak. “Hello . . . ,” she started to say again.

Then she heard the voice. A funny kind of voice. Almost an electronic voice, but rough and scratchy. It was someone looking for Andy Barclay.

“I’m sorry, but Andy isn’t with us anymore. Er, who is this?”

The connection faded a bit. She asked the man to repeat his words. It was a portable phone, she guessed, maybe one of those car phones. Then she heard him ask where he might find Andy.

The copy machine was shooting out copies so fast they were tumbling to the floor. Sammy was giggling, waving his rabbit, watching her.

Grace Poole told the man on the phone that Andy was with a foster family. The Simpsons. 2416 Bushill Street. She gave the phone number.

The man thanked her. Grace quickly hung up and ran over to the out-of-control copy machine and the giggling Sammy, not worried at all about giving out Andy’s address. After all, it was one of the boy’s relatives . . .

It was his Uncle Charles . . .

The liquor store clerk took forever scratching off the tiny price sticker from the bottle of Dom Perignon.

“It’s okay,” Mattson said finally. He kept trying to see out the window, to see that his car was okay. But it was black out there. Somebody could smash open the window and grab his cellular phone in thirty seconds, and he’d miss it all.

I should have put the phone in the trunk, Mattson thought. That

was SOP. Except he hadn't wanted it getting wet in all this rain. And he was only going to be gone for a few minutes . . .

If only this stupid cow-eyed clerk would hurry up.

She was still working at the sticker with her special razor. "It's okay!" Mattson said, forcefully pushing two twenties toward her.

But she was dedicated and persistent, and she kept hacking at the label until the bottle was clear of even the tiniest smidgeon of gummy glue. Only then did she take his money. "Thirty-four ninety-five," she said in a loud voice that the people on line—most of whom were bringing home their nightly allotment of Four Roses or Gallo vin ordinaire—could easily hear.

Mattson looked out at his car. Still there. Nobody around it. *Nobody he could see.*

The clerk gave him his change and then the bottle in a bag. "Thank you," she sang to him, but he dashed out the door.

While visions of Lisa danced in his head.

Lisa . . . slowly undressing, letting him watch her slip out of her skirt, unbutton her blouse. Then smiling, licking her lips while she eased off one bra strap, then the other.

Ta-da!

The rain flew at his face. God, he could practically drink the stuff as it rolled off his face right into his mouth.

He had taken just a few giant leaps when he heard the alarm.

"Shit!" he said. The damn car alarm had gone off. The car looked intact. Fine. What the hell could be . . . ?

He dug his keys out and stuck them in the door lock, twisting them to the left. The alarm went silent. There was no sign of any tampering. None at all. He looked in the back seat, but it was all dark, catching none of the light from the liquor store. He could see the front, and the cellular phone was there, and the Blaupunkt radio. He breathed easier.

I must get a better alarm system, he thought. Friends had advised him not to go with BMW's standard system. Get a custom job, they said.

He opened the door and hopped into the car. He took the bottle and stuck it on the floor, in the back, next to the toys.

I'm soaked, he thought. He smelled the furry odor of his wet wool suit—as if the water had revived all the dry-cleaning fluids.

Maybe I should call Lisa again, he thought. I'm running late. Just let her know that I'm on my way. He reached for the receiver.

It was wet.

"What the . . . ," he said. He took the receiver in his other hand and

looked at the wet spot in his palm. It wasn't water. It was something else, something thicker—

He heard something. From the backseat. A crinkling sound, one of the toys. It's the champagne bottle, he thought, rolling to the side. He let his right hand trail back, searching for it, checking it.

His eyes looked up to the rearview mirror. It was still black back there, completely black—until a car turned, backing out of Big Ray's parking lot. Its headlights pointed right at Mattson's car, and he saw something in the rearview mirror. Two eyes looking right at him.

Mattson took a breath.

The doll, he thought. It's just the doll's eyes. Sitting back there. It's no big deal.

He watched the blue eyes. And then the car turned away and it was dark again.

Mattson licked his lips. He had thrown the doll on its back. Way off to the side, he thought.

He kind of laughed. A shallow fart of air. But as he turned around in his seat, he felt something ram against his head. Something pointed right at his temple. And he heard a voice. A weird, ugly voice, hissing at him.

"Freeze, asshole!"

8

Shit, Mattson thought. Oh, shit. Somebody got into the car. Somebody got into the damn car. And they locked it again, and damn, oh God, I should have paid attention to the alarm, the damn *alarm!*

"Wh-what do you want?" Mattson said. (I thought it was the doll, he thought. How could I mistake—)

"No questions. Just drive."

Mattson nodded. Best to cooperate with whoever it is. Best to do *exactly* as he says. Don't get him mad or upset, and maybe, yeah, maybe I'll get out of this thing alive—

He felt the gun pressed tight against his head. "Now left . . . up to the corner. Yeah, then right. And straight. That's it, asshole. You're doing good. Real good." Mattson nodded. The gun followed the bobbing of his head. "I said don't damn well move. You got that?"

The intruder emphasized his point by jabbing the gun into the back of Mattson's head.

Mattson looked in the rearview mirror. But he couldn't see anything now. Nothing.

He just felt the gun.

* * *

They left the city, and the guy with the gun directed him into the suburbs, a blurry vision under the torrents of rain.

Maybe he just needed a ride, Mattson thought. Maybe that's all he needs. A ride someplace . . . and then he'll let me go.

I'll still be able to go to Lisa.

Mattson took a breath.

"All right, all right," the strange voice hissed. "All right, slow down."

He's looking at the house, Mattson guessed. Checking the numbers. And Mattson was tempted to turn around and look at his captor.

But that might make him mad. I don't want to make him mad. I'm close to getting out of this, Mattson thought, real close. Just gotta hang in there, just gotta—

"Okay, now drive up the block, up there. You see that church?"

Mattson started to nod but caught himself. "Yes."

"Pull into the parking lot."

The parking lot . . .

Mattson saw that it was dark, deserted. No AA meeting tonight. No church supper. No bingo. Even the church itself was all dark. God was out of town.

"And stop!" the voice hissed at him, close to his ear.

Mattson stopped his car. There was only the sound of the rain. No pitter-patter, but a savage whipping sound.

"Put your arms behind the seat."

"What?"

The gun swung around a bit and jabbed at Mattson's cheek. "Do it!"

Mattson did as he was told. Letting go of the wonderful security of the steering wheel, he brought his hands behind the seat.

"More!" the voice yelled. "Stretch your arms around!"

Then Mattson started shaking. What's he going to do to me? he wondered. Oh, God, what is he going to do to me?

He heard a crinkling noise and the sound of toys being moved around. And then—very quickly—he felt his hands being wrapped around and around with a Good Guy slinky. Around and around, until the coils were tight. Mattson kept shaking in his seat. He tried to talk. But his throat, his lips, were so dry nothing came out.

He tried wetting his lips. "Please," he whimpered. "Please don't shoot me. I have plastic. Visa, American Express Gold Card. You can have them all—just . . ."

But the pistol was there, pointing at the side of his head. He could turn his eyes and see the barrel.

Oh, please, he thought. Then he started to beg again, but the voice was in his ear. "Bang!" it said. Mattson heard the trigger being pulled, and then a stream of water shot right into his eye.

And now the voice laughed, loud, uproarious laughter. And Mattson started to laugh, too. It's not a real gun, he thought. Oh, God . . . it's not real. He tied me up and he's going to let me live because it's not a real gun!

Mattson was undisturbed by the other sounds he heard, the sounds of rustling plastic. One of the Good Guy bags was being emptied.

Probably going to use it to take his stuff, Mattson thought. Keep his stuff dry. Yeah, probably . . .

The guy was still laughing and Mattson kept laughing. It was funny. He was going to live. And here he had thought he was going to die.

The sound of the plastic bag was closer. The man's strange laughing was closer.

And then the bag was pulled over Mattson's head.

And the drawstring was pulled tight.

Now Mattson kicked and pulled. Fighting against his seat belt, fighting against the drawstring that closed around his neck. He screamed, and he heard the muffled sound inside the bag. He was breathing hard, pulling the plastic tight against his face. He tasted it. He tried to chew at it, to chew a hole. But there just wasn't enough slack.

He sucked at it.

He heard the car's back door open.

He sucked again, breathing nothing.

And through the clear plastic he saw someone running away, to the sidewalk.

Someone short. Someone with red hair.

He sucked one more time.

One last time.

Andy woke up.

The nightmare ended.

And he saw that the door was really open, not closed like he thought it was. Open like it was supposed to be. And there was pale blue light . . . a night-light.

He still held the blanket close. But even lying flat, he could see that toy chest was shut.

If he had been home, he might have called out for his mommy. He would have asked her to sit with him in the dark. Or he might have padded into her room and curled up next to her, feeling so safe next to her warm body.

But he wasn't home.

He reached out for the light switch. The light came on, making his eyes blink. He saw the picture of his mother on the table, right next to his bed, where he had put it earlier.

And he remembered what Mom had said: "It happened, Andy. They won't believe us. They won't even believe the detectives. Because they don't want to. But you *know* it happened, and I know. And it won't be long before we are back together."

Andy had asked, "Why won't the detective help us? Why won't he tell them what happened?"

She smiled and said that he had tried. Really tried. But this . . . this separation . . . this temporary separation had to happen.

Andy nodded and said, "Yes," when his mother asked him whether

he could be a big boy.

Now he looked around the room, at the football and baseball posters, the nice color blue. He sat up and looked at the closed toy chest. Then he crept forward a bit, until he could reach down and open it.

He flicked the chest open, banging the lid against the wall, and he saw the doll, Tommy. He crept forward a bit more, right to the edge of the bed, and leaned down, slowly, so slowly, and picked up the doll. He turned it around until he could see its face—those big eyes, that stupid smile.

I hate that smile, Andy thought.

Holding the doll as far away from his body as he could, he stepped off the bed and walked over to his door.

Andy stopped at his doorway. He leaned out and looked down the hallway. It was dark, except for a faint stream of moonlight from a small window at the end of it. And he saw the stairs leading down, to more darkness.

He stepped out of the pretty blue room. When he got to the stairs, he carried Tommy by one leg, dangling the doll from one hand while his other hand held onto the bannister. He stepped carefully through the darkness.

And he wondered, Will Tommy say something while I carry him? Will everyone hear and come running out to see what I'm doing?

He made sure of every step he took. Slowly, carefully guiding his feet down. I don't want to fall, he thought. Not with the doll. I might fall on the doll. *I don't want to do that.*

He got to the last step. He turned and walked straight into the living room. It had been such a sunny room earlier that day, but now it was filled with dark, ominous shadows. For a moment he backed away, almost out of the room. The chairs crouched in the room like sleeping animals.

He gathered together all his courage and took one step inside the room. Then another, and another, until he could make out the shape of the big easy chair just to his left. He swung Tommy back and forth, back and forth as if he was giving him a ride, taking him for a swing. He flung the doll toward the chair.

He watched it travel through the air and then land in the chair. Tommy's head flopped against one of the arms.

Then Tommy turned. And—without looking back—Andy ran, as hard as he could, straight up the stairs, straight into his room, stopping only to shut off the light. And then—with the doll outside—he locked the door.

And he waited, thinking, At least it's out of my room. At least it's not *here* anymore.

9

Kyle crept into the house, as quietly as possible. No way did she want Phil to come padding down the stairs, making a big deal because she was late.

Late! Does he know what century this is?

He tried to act like her father—grabbing her cigarettes and setting a curfew! It was a joke, but Kyle played along. It was better here at Chez Joanne and Phil than at the center, and much better here than in the street . . . Well, not much, but better. Free food and free board while she made her plans. Made plans and earned money.

Asking people whether they wanted pickles and mustard on their burgers didn't pay much, but she was able to save something. Not a lot, but something. If she could just hang in here a few months, she might have a couple hundred dollars saved.

I could go to California on that, she thought.

She walked up the carpeted stairs. The grandfather clock ticked so loudly she was sure it masked her footsteps. Tick. Tick. Tick. It was an ugly old thing, the size of a coffin, and every hour it noisily bonged. There were a lot of old things in this house.

She had already reached her room when she thought she heard something down the hall.

Maybe it's that new kid, Andy. He complicates things, she thought. She couldn't imagine that dear old Phil and Joanne would care about keeping her, with a cute little boy running around. She might have to be on her best behavior.

And wouldn't that be disgusting?

She shrugged, hearing nothing, and went into her room.

Chucky crouched behind the mailbox. The rain had soaked his striped T-shirt and coveralls, which now stuck to his plastic skin like shrink wrap. But there it was, he saw. Right there, just across the street. Andy's new home.

My new home, Chucky thought.

A car roared up the street, sending a spray of water slicing out toward him. He ducked behind the mailbox.

There are advantages in being this size, he thought. Definite advantages. No one sees you. And it's great for slashing at people's

legs, cutting them just behind the knees or severing their tendons. That brings the big guys down pretty quick.

He stepped away from the mailbox and, checking that the street was clear, ran across it. A loud crack of thunder seemed to cheer him on.

He got to the driveway and saw a station wagon.

That hadn't been there before, he thought. Somebody had just come home. No problem, he thought. I can be quiet.

He was walking alongside the car, near the front of it, when he heard movement, then tapping sounds, a growl. A monstrously large German shepherd leaped out, barking and snarling at him.

Chucky froze.

He could tear me into pieces, he thought. He could bite my doll body and cut me right in two! And I don't have anything to fight him off with.

The German shepherd sniffed the air. Then it took a step closer to him.

Chucky smiled. Hey, he thought, he's confused. Doesn't quite know what to make of me. I'm not a human, and I'm not a raccoon, so what the hell am I?

The dog stopped. Chucky saw the rain splatter its blackish snout. He saw a recognizable glint in the big dog's eyes.

It was a look Chucky knew well.

It was fear.

"Okay," Chucky said. "You want me? Here I am." He took a step closer to the dog, stretching out his doll hands. They were strong, those little doll hands. Amazingly strong. As he walked, Chucky pictured himself leaping on the dog's back and riding it while he pulled tight around its neck, and tighter, until the stupid animal was dead.

Chucky took another step. He made his eyes click open and shut.

"Here I am," he whispered.

The dog moaned. It scratched at the ground and backed away. It snorted, turned, and bolted toward the back of the house.

What a pussy, Chucky thought. He glanced up at the side of the house. He saw a rose trellis that looked almost like a ladder. Maybe I could climb up the trellis, he thought. Right up to a window on the second floor.

Yeah, and maybe the whole thing will come ripping off the walls, and I'll go flying on my little rubbery ass.

There has to be an easier way.

He kept walking down the driveway, looking for a better way inside

the nice Simpson house.

Then he discovered that someone had left the back door open.

Kyle pulled her nightgown over her head, and—damn!—she heard a sound again. It came from outside, a growling sound. Probably just the dog from next door, a big animal that the neighbors put out each night as if it were a cat.

She pulled her hair through the nightgown and went to the window. It was still raining hard. She saw the station wagon. And the driveway. But she didn't see anything else.

It's probably nothing, she thought.

But then she heard a real sound—a scream.

From right inside the house.

Kyle got to Andy's room first. She went to the doorknob. She twisted it, but the door didn't open.

Shit, she thought. It's locked. She still heard the kid screaming from inside the bedroom, and it made her back away from the door—as if whatever had him inside could get her too.

She knocked. "Andy, you okay? Are you . . ."

Then Phil was there. "What the hell . . . ?" he said.

"He cried out," Kyle said. "But his door is locked."

She watched Phil try the doorknob, twisting it violently left and right.

"Phil," Joanne said, coming up next to her husband, touching his arm. "Can't you get it open?"

Kyle pounded on the door and said, "Andy? Andy, open up."

But the kid just kept screaming. And Kyle thought of the sound she had heard outside, down in the driveway. At least she *thought* it was outside.

Phil pushed her aside and rammed the door, sending his big body crashing into it.

It didn't budge.

He backed up and ran harder at it. Andy's screaming only seemed to swell as Phil banged into the door.

"Hurry!" Joanne yelled.

But Kyle could see that Phil's charging the door wasn't getting anywhere. She ran back to her room and snatched a nail file off her night table. She could hear Andy's screaming through the walls. She ran back to the door.

"Let me try," she said, inserting herself between Phil and the door.

Phil stopped for a moment and said, “Where did you learn how to do that?”

But she just kept working the file into the lock, flicking it left and right. She began to think it wasn’t going to work. Phil put his hands on her shoulders to move her away.

And just then she heard a click.

She threw the door open.

Kyle watched them try to comfort Andy. Phil and Joanne were all smiles, patting Andy’s forehead, which was sopping. They kept trying to pull the blankets down from his neck. But Andy held them tight, his fingers locked on the satiny edge.

“Andy, it’s all right,” Joanne cooed.

No it’s not, Kyle thought. That kid is one scared little puppy.

He was shaking as if he were feverish. Phil stood up. The head of the household looked confused by the whole thing.

“You’re fine,” Joanne said to Andy. “You just had a scary old nightmare, that’s all.”

Andy’s fingers stayed locked on the blanket. “I started dreaming about Chucky again. He tried to take my soul. He came back . . .”

Oh, great, thought Kyle. I know who this kid is now. He’s that real nutcase. The kid who thought his doll came to life and killed people. While it’s more than likely *he* did it.

Well, isn’t this pleasant, she thought.

She turned to leave the room, while Phil knelt by the door to examine the damage she had done to the lock.

He’s here, thought Chucky. Yes, the little brat is here. Why, that’s his room down at the end of the hall. And there were other voices.

He edged closer, sticking to the wall, staying as low as possible. I can’t stay here, he thought, can’t stay upstairs. Got to figure out something to do.

He was closer, almost at the pool of light that spilled through the doorway.

He heard Andy say his name.

“Chucky . . . coming to get me.”

Well, you got that right on the money, kiddo.

Andy saw Phil looking at the lock, shaking his head, and then looking over at him. Joanne sat with Andy, rubbing his brow, talking quietly to him. Her hand felt cool and nice.

But Phil was shaking his head.

"That lock," he said, pointing to it as if Andy didn't know which lock, "was worth fifty bucks." He looked right at Andy. "That's what it will cost me to replace it." Phil stood up and walked back to the bed. The man scratched his head and looked down at Andy. "Andy, why did you lock the door?"

He's not going to want to hear this, Andy thought. He won't like what I say. Andy looked at Joanne. She smoothed his hair.

He took a breath. "S-so Chucky couldn't get in."

He heard Kyle laugh.

"But, honey," Joanne said, "you know that was all in your imagination. Remember? It was just a nightmare."

Andy decided he shouldn't say anything. He saw Phil shake his head. He was upset, and Andy knew that Joanne was the only one who wanted him to stay here.

Phil cleared his throat. "From now on, you leave the doors unlocked. Deal?" Andy nodded. "Now, I'm going back to bed."

Andy was glad to watch Phil leave. He looked at Kyle. She shook her head as if agreeing with Phil, and then walked out as well.

Andy grabbed Joanne's hand hard. "Don't leave me," he said.

"Don't worry," she said gently. "I'll stay here as long as you want me to."

The man—Mr. Straight-Arrow Suburbanite—walked out of the room and into another bedroom. Then a girl followed him, going into the next room, just up from Andy's.

Chucky watched her. Even in her blowsy nightgown, she looked good. Very tasty.

Of course, he thought, it's been a while and—heh, heh—I don't have the apparatus I once had.

And that made him think of other things he liked to do to women. Things that even Chucky could do with his little arms and little hands. Necks aren't so big. Not so big at all.

The mother was staying with Andy, calming him down. That's too bad, Chucky thought. Too damn bad.

He edged a few steps closer and then waited.

Joanne smiled at Andy, thinking he was too beautiful a boy to be so scared.

"I miss my mother," Andy said. Joanne nodded, as she picked up the photo of Andy's mother. She was pretty, and Joanne felt a terrible

jab of envy.

"I know you do," Joanne said.

"Will I ever see her again?"

Joanne laughed, trying to make it sound as if that was an absurd question.

"Of course you will, Andy." As if to seal the answer, she gave him a great hug. "I promise."

For the first time since he woke up screaming, she saw Andy smile.

I've just got to walk past the room, Chucky thought. I can't stand out here. Someone might come out in the hall to go to the john or raid the fridge for twinkies. They'll see me. I've just got to walk past the kid's room . . . find somewhere to lay low. I gotta just keep moving so they won't see me, he thought. I gotta stay in the shadows.

He nodded to himself, getting ready. And then he moved, as fast as his little Good Guy sneakers would take him. He didn't look in the room. If anyone had happened to look out, all they would have seen was a red-and-blue blur, topped with a bright red mop.

I should dye this stupid hair, he thought. It's like a frigging traffic light.

He kept on going, back down the stairs now. He had to reach up and hold onto the bannister. It was like being five again.

It was dark down there, nice and dark. So he could figure out his next move.

At the bottom of the stairs he saw the living room to his left, and he kept on running. He turned around, checking the foyer, checking that no one was following him.

He backed into a big easy chair.

"Shit," he hissed, startled. He spun around and was looking at a mirror image of himself.

But not quite.

This Good Guy doll was bone dry, and his hair sat squarely on his head. The doll's eyes blinked. Then it spoke: "Hi! I'm Tommy and I'm your—"

Chucky reached back and slugged the doll on its puffy cheeks, hissing to it, "Shut up, you idiot!"

10

“What was that?” Andy said, shooting up from his pillow. “I heard something . . . from downstairs.”

He’s so scared, Joanne thought. Absolutely terrified. And for the first time she began to think that maybe Andy Barclay might be more than she could handle.

“It’s nothing,” Joanne said. “There’s nobody here,” she cooed, “and nobody’s going to hurt you.”

Andy looked at the door and then to her face, searching for reassurance.

She gently pushed against his shoulders. “And now it’s time you went back to sleep, Andy.”

Chucky had given the doll his best shot, a real good slug.

Too good. It cartwheeled backward, over the arm of the chair. When its head hit the front of the brick fireplace, Chucky heard a sharp crack, and then a thud as it plopped forward onto the wooden floor.

And then the doll started to talk.

“I like to be hugged . . . I like to be hugged . . . I like to be hugged . . .”

Over and over, those same stupid words, in that goddamn whining voice. Chucky turned and looked over his shoulder. Someone’s going to hear this, he thought. And then they’re all going to come storming down the stairs, wondering how the hell they ended up with *two* Good Guy Dolls. But, I’ll have to explain, one of us isn’t so good.

“I like to be hugged . . . I like to be . . .”

A car passed outside, turning onto the block, and milk-white light shot into the room.

Chucky saw a stand with fireplace tools on the other side of the hearth. He ran over and pulled out the poker. He raised it in the air.

“Hug *this,”* he said. He brought it smashing down on Tommy’s head. But the plastic head was hard, and though Chucky smashed the poker right on its forehead, he made only a small crack.

He raised the poker into the air. Grunting, he brought it down again. And again, and again, until finally he didn’t hear Tommy’s voice. He brought the poker way back for one last blow, hard enough

to smash that face into a thousand bits.

But the curved hook of the poker caught the table near the chair. The table tilted, and Chucky heard something roll off it. He turned and saw a statue falling through the air. He watched it hit the floor and shatter into bits.

Chucky froze. And again he listened for movement on the stairs.

But it was still quiet upstairs, so he turned his attention back to Tommy. He wasn't human, Chucky thought. It wasn't the same as doing in a real live person. It lacked that special thrill . . . that *je ne sais quoi.*

But he didn't like leaving any job unfinished. He gave the doll one final smash to the head.

I must be working out my hostilities, Chucky thought. I must have a lot of pent-up anger for Good Guy dolls. Can't imagine why . . .

He walked over to the doll and gave it a kick to the stomach. It rolled over, exposing its back. Chucky leaned over the doll and pulled up the T-shirt. He undid the latch to the battery compartment and took out the two batteries.

Now, he thought, to dispose of the corpse. He stood there perfectly still, listening. He heard the rain still coming down, the ping of the drops against the windows. Goddamn, it's still raining, he thought. It looks like I'll have to go outside.

He grabbed Tommy by the doll's ankles and started dragging it out of the living room.

He was nearly to the foyer when he heard footsteps.

Someone was coming down!

He stood there, holding the doll by its feet. He looked around the room as the footsteps grew louder, closer. Another car went down the street, sending an arc of light slicing through the room. He saw the couch and he gave Tommy a quick kick, sending the doll rolling under it.

Just as someone came into the room.

Chucky let himself go wide-eyed, doing his best to impersonate the deceased Tommy. But he could see who came in and turned on a light. It was Kyle.

She walked over to the couch. Chucky wished he could turn and check that the doll was hidden completely under it. But Kyle stopped and, seeing Chucky in her path, reached down and grabbed the doll.

She threw him into the air, and the room became a spinning blur, as Chucky turned over and over, until he landed, head-first, next to the TV. He tried to let his body slump into a position that would let him keep watching Kyle to see if she spotted Tommy.

Then Chucky noticed something real bad.

A bit of Tommy's foot, a bit of his red sneaker, was sticking out from under the couch. And Kyle went and sat on the couch—just there!—right over the foot. She put a small bottle on the coffee table. Nail polish. And then she put her feet on the edge of the table. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV.

He heard sounds, shrill voices from the speaker behind him. He couldn't see the picture, not without moving, not without coming to life.

And I can't do that, he thought.

People were jabbering at each other. It was a talk show, some stupid-ass talk show.

He watched Kyle screw open the nail polish. She pulled out the small brush and wrinkled her toes. She was looking down. Damn, she's going to see the sneaker and she'll pull it out . . . and then she'll see the smashed head.

She'll look at me. She'll remember Andy's crazy story. And maybe then she'll scream. She'll get up and run. And . . . and . . . I can't let that happen.

He looked around for something he could use on the girl, something that would be quick and effective. There was the poker. That might work. But there might be something better around. Maybe a letter opener, maybe something smaller, sharper.

The girl started dabbing her toes. He watched her lick her lips, concentrating as each little piggy got a new sheen of pink. Tell you what I'd like to do to your little piggies, sister. Tell you what color *I'd* paint them. How about red?

She put one foot down on the floor, the one she wasn't working on. And Chucky saw it land right next to Tommy's foot. Oh, she's gotta see it now, he thought. There's no way she'll miss it now.

He heard himself moan. It just escaped him. He watched her face to see if she had heard him. But she had this show—Arsenio Hall—turned up too loud.

I have to just get her, he thought. I just got to move and . . .

The poker was within his reach. It was only inches away, where he had dropped it after rearranging Tommy's face. Only inches. He started leaning, ever so slowly, in that direction while he kept his eyes on Kyle, who seemed glued to her work. He moved his arm, extending the fingers.

I should feel it now, he thought. He touched wood, air, but no poker.

He risked moving his eyes, those noisy mechanical eyes, just a little

bit. To see where his little hand was . . . and where the hell the poker was.

He saw that he would have to lean to the left just a bit more. He moved his body, even though if Kyle looked up now, he knew she would spot him. No doubt about it. But then he felt the metal grip of the poker.

And Chucky thought, Now we're in business, sports fans!

"Kyle!" It was Phil, calling from upstairs. Then, louder, "Kyle, shut off the TV and go to bed!"

Chucky froze. He heard Kyle sigh. She put down her nail polish and screwed the brush-cap back into place. She zapped the TV and cut off Arsenio's first guest, the virtuous Jessica Hahn.

My kind of lady, Chucky thought, back when I was active.

And then Kyle stood up.

And Chucky—his hand still on the poker—watched her painted foot land right next to the small sneaker.

She can feel it, he thought. She *has* to feel the sneaker. But Kyle just walked out of the room, shutting off the light on the way.

Chucky released his grip on the poker.

Just as Kyle was about to enter the foyer, she stopped. She shook her head. As if something confused her . . . something out of place.

Maybe she noticed I'm not where she tossed me, thought Chucky. How good are her powers of observation . . . ?

She came back into the dark living room, heading right for the coffee table.

Chucky kept watching her.

When she got to the table, she snatched up the nail polish she'd forgotten. And then she turned.

She was looking right at him.

He felt her eyes studying him.

I'm not in the same position, he knew. I'm not where I landed when she tossed me. *She can see that,* even in this darkness.

The poker is just there, he reminded himself. Just there. I just have to reach out, pick it up and—

But then he saw her shake her head again, discounting the thought. She turned and walked out to the foyer and on up the stairs.

And, thought Chucky, she'll never know how lucky she was.

Lucky, that is, this time.

Because next time, as Jim Morrison said, no one gets out of here alive . . .

He dragged the doll's body out to the kitchen. Bits of its plastic skull flaked, leaving a trail tracing back to the living room.

I can get that later, Chucky thought.

Some exposed metal part of the head screeched against the linoleum, so Chucky moved more slowly as he got closer to the side door.

When he got to the door, he undid the chain. Then he unhooked the bolt while holding Tommy with one hand. When he opened the door he was met with a blast of rain that dotted the floor. I'll have to clean this up, too, he thought.

He pulled the doll through the door, outside and then down the steps. He could see the backyard, the fence running around the outside of the property, a wooden swing hanging from a tree for all the brats that the Simpsons liked to take in.

The grass was thick everywhere back here. Everywhere but under the swing. He dragged the body over and dropped it there. He looked around for something to dig with. He saw a small metal shed, the type that suburban types liked to store their leaf blowers and their power mowers in.

And, he thought, if I'm lucky, a shovel.

He ran over there, getting wet again, his sneakers soaked through.

He had to tug the metal door of the shed open. It groaned, but the loud wrenching noise was swallowed by a distant rumble of thunder. The storm was receding.

Right inside the door he found a shovel, a giant *mother* of a shovel. He grabbed it and ran back to the doll. It was splattered by mud. Big muddy drops were sent flying up by the rain.

Chucky dug, grunting and muttering to himself. It won't be long now, he thought. Not long at all.

The dirt was hard, and he had to jab at it, cursing it, breaking up clumps. He hit rocks and saw a tiny spark erupt when his shovel blade met stone.

But he kept at it until he thought he had a hole big enough in which to bury Tommy. *Just* big enough.

He threw the shovel to the side and grabbed the doll by its foot. The sneaker came off in his hand. "Shit!" he said. He grabbed at the ankle with the red-and-white striped sock. And he pulled the doll into the hole.

It was shallow. The doll would be barely covered.

But it would be good enough, he thought. After all, it doesn't have to last for long. Just until I'm all done here.

Maybe twenty-four hours.

Tops.

As he shoveled the loose dirt back on top of the doll, Chucky thought of the last time he had buried something this small. It had been raining that night, too.

Can you believe it? he thought. Always burying things in the rain.

He covered the smashed face first, filling in all of its cracks and craters with the mud.

Of course, she had been a bit bigger than the doll. But not much. Not too much.

He looked over his shoulder. He checked the Simpson house for any lights coming on. I've got to clean up, he thought. Take care of the mess. Make everything neat and tidy for Phil and Joanne.

And Andy.

Don't want Andy suspecting . . .

He started covering the body.

Yeah, she had been a little bigger than this. And—shit—did anyone get the irony? Did anyone else besides himself see the irony of this whole thing?

The doll was invisible now, covered with dirt. But Chucky went on shoveling, getting it good and covered.

And he remembered: Yes, Mom had been a small woman . . . real small. Just under four feet tall. A midget.

Not a dwarf, she corrected people, very sweetly, very nicely, as if she hadn't been suffering from a lifetime of snickering people. *I'm a midget.*

And Charles Lee Ray lived in dread that he'd grow up to be a midget, too. When that didn't happen, he still had to deal with the questions from the kids on the South Side.

"How come your mama's so short? Charlie . . . what's a matter, your dad only get his dick in halfway?"

And they'd laugh and laugh. It was so funny to them. So damn funny . . .

He looked down at the dirt. He couldn't see Tommy anymore. Chucky just stood there, thinking.

Those kids didn't know the half of it. They thought he was just embarrassed having a midget for a mom.

But he always knew he was going to kill his mother . . . it was just a matter of time.

No, there never had been any question about that.

11

Her name was Minna Elizabeth Ray.

But the people who knew her called her Mrs. Ray.

When Charles Ray was very young, he didn't have any idea there was something different about his mother . . . something odd. When you're very little, you don't see people staring, you don't see kids snickering, you don't hear people whispering.

It was only when he got older, and bigger, when he started to grow, that he noticed something.

His mother was short. Very short. She had always seemed big to him. Like any parent, he guessed. But he saw now that she was only inches taller than he was. And soon after he graduated from third grade, Chucky passed her in height.

That's when things got bad.

He never knew his father.

But he had heard a lot about him. Minna called him "a big rat . . . a big good-for-nothing rat . . . a big slob . . . a slob without a heart . . ."

And Chucky understood, from his mom's use of the word "big," from very early on, that his father had been normal-sized. But Chucky never saw him to verify that fact.

There were no photos, just his mother's endless rants. Though she smiled up at all the big people she had to deal with—at the stores, the neighbors, everyone—her face would darken when she turned away. It would darken, turn evil, and Chucky would lie awake, scared, as he listened to his mother, outside, in their apartment's tiny living room, drinking, talking to herself.

And then Chucky grew taller.

He was becoming one of the big people.

And that was not a good thing.

She started yammering at him all the time. Nagging him about his room, his lousy grades at school, the way he dressed. And soon she started talking about him and his father in the same way. "Your father was a big nothing . . . and that's what you'll be."

And she started to hit him.

Lashing out, for no reason.

First, just one blow, then more until she sent a rain of gnarled fists crashing down on him.

He learned how to cover his head and protect himself. He learned to stay out of sight when she started making bottle-and-glass noises in the kitchen.

He learned to hate the woman.

The kids in school were great. Just super. Not a day passed that they didn't taunt him about his "dwarf-mother." They called her "the little woman."

"Couldn't be your mother, Ray," they'd laugh. "You're too *big* to have come out of such a small—"

It was just another reason to hate her.

But every day he grew bigger and stronger.

And he started to make plans. At first he thought he'd run away. But where? He had no money, no relatives he knew about. Where could he go? Then he began to see her size as an advantage. He could laugh now when she started smacking at his head. He got so good he could dodge her blows while she shrieked, spittle flying from her puppet-mouth right at his face. "Don't you laugh at me, you horrible boy, you ugly boy." And then she'd try to work in some more blows, yelling, screaming, "Don't you laugh . . ."

She's so small, he saw. Small enough that he could, yes, he could lift her.

There was a park across the street. Nobody played there or walked there too much. The kids at school said it was a drug hangout. But Ray looked down at the park at night. He saw the shadowy shapes moving around and the occasional glint of their eyes looking around . . . looking up at him.

Charles Lee Ray suspected that a whole lot of interesting things went on down there. *A whole lot.*

He found himself grabbing the windowsill, gripping it hard. He felt the wood give, almost crumble under his fingers. He saw those eyes, down below, as if they were waiting for him to play with them. He looked at the claw marks his hands made in the wood.

And he knew what he was going to do.

He waited until she was drunk, staggering around the living room, the kitchen.

He walked up behind her. She was muttering to herself, didn't even see him coming. She held a big grape jelly tumbler filled with some cheap Scotch.

He thought that he'd just grab her and do it. But that wasn't good enough. She hates me, he thought. For being normal. She hates me, and I have to let her know that I hate her too.

"Mom," he said gently. Then, smirking, "Mommy." She turned,

looking at his stomach, then, blinking, up to his face.

"Whad'ya want?" she said, the words a long slur.

As she stood there, wobbling, her face looking at his, he saw a glint of recognition bloom in her eyes.

She knows she's in trouble, Chucky thought.

He flexed his fingers.

And he loved that look of horror in her eyes. That terrible, terrible look. *It was wonderful.*

"Mom," he said gently.

He reached out and wrapped his hands around her neck.

He closed her throat with his hands. She gagged, her eyes bulged out. And then—he was enjoying himself much too much—he eased up, giving her just the tiniest teasing breath of air before—whomp!—slamming his hands shut again, closing down the airpipe.

He was strong and she was light, and he found he could even pull her off her feet, letting her kick the air.

Up and down he jerked her. Her nails scratched at his hands. She tried to kick him.

But then came the first of many wonderful moments for Charles Lee Ray. She stopped struggling. She hung there in his arms . . . a lifeless . . .

Doll.

He carried her across the street, stuffed inside a big lawn bag. He grunted, carrying her down the steps. She seemed much heavier dead. Then he dragged his way over to the park, to a lamp post with a light that he saw was out. It was black there. And he wasn't scared of being caught. He wasn't scared of anyone trying to do something to him.

Because if they do, he thought, I'll just open my bag and say, "See this! Come near me and you can be next!"

He had a wonderful sense of peace and strength. A side benefit of killing his mom, he guessed.

He buried her deep, using a small spade. It took most of the night. Some crack-heads strolled by to watch, but they kept on moving when they saw him glaring at them, when they saw the bag.

He went back to the apartment feeling free.

He was eventually caught, of course. His great plan was filled with arrows that pointed right to his nasty murder. Dogs found her body.

Nobody came to the little witch's funeral. Except for Chucky. The youth officer said it would look good.

He was sent to the Spofford, Illinois, Juvenile Home. No jail, no trial.

How could there be? He smiled, thinking about it. I was only thirteen years old.

Only thirteen years old . . .

I was young, I had my whole life ahead of me. And we all make mistakes . . . don’t we?

The rain stopped.

Chucky had to clean up . . . put the shovel away . . . get back to the living room.

Because tomorrow was going to be a big day. A really big day.

He looked up at Andy Barclay’s bedroom.

12

Andy sat at the wooden kitchen table waiting for Joanne to finish with his breakfast. He would have been just as happy with a bowl of Captain Crunch, but she was fixing him something . . . special.

She didn't look so pretty this morning. She didn't look really awake yet. When his mom woke him up, she was usually all dressed, with her makeup on and some perfume, all ready for work. But Joanne was flopping around in slippers and a big, fluffy white bathrobe. Doing something very strange to an egg.

She opened the egg with a quick crack to the side of the blender. Then she dropped it into a strainer, the kind his mom used for spaghetti and Andy used for a helmet.

The clear, gummy part of the egg dripped into the blender, joining a banana that sat in a pool of orange juice. When all the clear stuff had dripped down, covering the banana with goo, Joanne moved the strainer with the eyelike yolk to the sink, covered the blender, and turned it on.

It made a loud whirring noise. Joanne turned and smiled at Andy, and he smiled back.

So far, it didn't look like any eggs he had ever had before. He hated the noise of the blender. He wanted to put his hands on his ears, but he thought that maybe she'd be mad.

I want to act how they want me to act, he thought. It's better here than at the center.

Sometimes, in the center, Andy had had the feeling that he'd never get out. He felt as if he'd stay there until he was all grown up. And maybe even beyond that.

But here, with the morning sun bouncing off the wood table, he could imagine the doorbell ringing. And he'd hurry to the window and see his mom's car. Then he'd run to the door. To a big hug from his mom.

I'm not here forever, he told himself. And they're nice people. He looked at Kyle, who was looking at a magazine and chewing on a mouthful of Cheerios. They're kinda nice.

"There," Joanne said. "It's all done."

She smiled again, pushing her hair off her forehead. She took the blender off its base and poured a great big Mickey Mouse glass full of the mixture. It was still orange, like the orange juice. But when she

placed the glass in front of him, Andy could see that the mixture was paler, with tiny strands running through it.

It reminded him of a picture in his old first-grade class. It was one of the planets. It looked like Jupiter.

"Bon appétit," Kyle said, looking over at him.

Joanne stood next to him. She's waiting to watch me drink it, he knew. She wants to see if I like it.

He thought of the egg, the runny clear glop, and the banana, spinning around. His stomach felt tight.

"It's an egg shake, Andy," Joanne patted his shoulder. "You'll like it."

He looked up at her, hesitant. "My mom . . . used to cook eggs."

Kyle laughed.

"Oh . . . ," Joanne said. "Well, Phil says . . ."

Kyle jumped in. "Phil says," she said, sounding as if she had memorized the words, "that the grease used in cooking accounts for thirty percent of the excess body fat in the average American." Kyle leaned closer to Andy. "And don't even get him started on cholesterol."

Andy picked up the glass. He took a breath. Joanne just stood there, watching him, waiting. He brought the glass to his lips, and then he took a sip.

It was horrible. It was one of the worst things he had ever tasted, worse than that cold medicine Dr. Wormley prescribed, the orange stuff that Andy hated. This was *much worse.*

"You like it?" Joanne asked.

Andy nodded. He looked up at her. But her face didn't look happy. She knows I hate it, he thought. "I do," he added.

But Joanne put her hands in the pocket of her bathrobe and shrugged. "That's okay, Andy. You didn't have to drink it."

She turned away. And Kyle leaned close to him, whispering, telling him something he already knew. "You hurt her feelings."

He looked over at Joanne standing facing the sink, rinsing out the strainer and then grabbing the blender. And he looked at his nearly full Mickey Mouse glass. He reached out and brought the glass to his lips. He chugged the liquid, letting the gummy taste run over his lips. He kept drinking it until the glass was empty, and then he slammed it down. Joanne turned, a big smile on her face now.

"Oh, so you *did* like it!" she said. Andy nodded. He felt Kyle watching him. "Want some more?" Joanne asked.

"I feel kinda full," Andy said.

Joanne, still smiling, nodded and moved to the foyer. She called out, “Phil, breakfast is getting old!”

“Time for Phil’s batch,” Kyle whispered.

Andy sat there listening to Phil’s heavy steps coming down the stairs.

But he didn’t come straight into the kitchen. He turned away—into the living room, Andy guessed. Andy hadn’t looked in that room this morning. He didn’t want to see that stupid Good Guy there. And he tried to keep away this thought: What if it’s *not* there?

Joanne came back into the kitchen and ruffled his hair. “You better get ready to go out and play, Andy,” she said. “First day, we don’t want to be . . .”

He heard a crunch. They all heard a crunch. And Phil said a word Andy knew but wasn’t supposed to use: “Damn!”

Kyle surfaced from her magazine and cereal. She looked at Andy, then Joanne. Everyone waited while Phil walked into the kitchen. He had something in his hand.

“What is it?” Joanne said. “What’s . . .”

Phil leaned over the kitchen table and turned his hands over, and a bunch of broken pieces of pottery clattered onto the table.

Andy looked at the broken object. He saw the sharp jagged edges and tiny pieces, but he didn’t see what it was, couldn’t recognize it, until . . .

He saw the baby. Intact. Looking up with big eyes. At nothing. Because the mother was in a hundred pieces.

Andy looked up at Phil.

“Do either of you have anything to say?” Phil asked.

Andy looked back at the statue. He thinks I did it, Andy thought. Because of what happened yesterday. He thinks *I* broke the statue.

Kyle cleared her throat. “I think we should talk to a lawyer first.”

“Hey, don’t talk wise, Kyle. This isn’t funny.” Phil looked back to Andy, talking right to him. “That was a very expensive statue. And I’ve told both of you not to touch it.” He moved closer to Andy. “What did I tell you yesterday, the first day you got here?”

Andy licked his lips.

“Now one of you did this, and one of you owes Joanne an apology . . . and maybe a new statue.”

Joanne leaned out and picked up the baby. “Phil, maybe . . .”

“I’m innocent,” Kyle announced. “That’s all I know.” She shoved another spoonful of Cheerios into her mouth.

“Andy?” Phil demanded.

"I . . . I . . ." He looked at Joanne. "I didn't do it."

Phil grunted. "Look, did you come down here last night, Andy? One of you must be lying, one of you . . ." His voice was getting louder.

Joanne leaned out and touched his arm. "Phil, please. Lighten up, honey. It's just a statue. We can get another and . . ."

"Andy, did you come down here last night?"

Andy nodded. He waited, hoping Joanne would touch Phil again, make him stop talking, make him leave Andy alone. Andy thought about the doll, sitting inside the living room. He thought about telling them that he wanted it out of his room, that he was afraid, that—

But that would be even worse.

"Why?" Phil asked. "Why did you come down here?"

"I . . . I wanted something to eat."

"Okay. All right. You two leave me no choice. Until someone fesses up, you're both grounded."

"Oh, no," Kyle groaned. "I have a date tonight. Come on, I told you —"

"Sorry," Phil snapped.

And Andy felt Kyle looking at him as if she wanted to throw him out the window.

Kyle slammed down the lid to the washing machine, not caring whether Joanne and Big Phil heard the noise.

They're both up there, she thought, enjoying their tasty egg shakes, slurping up every last drop of gooey egg and orange pulp.

She turned the washer on.

"You and Andy can do the laundry, Kyle," Joanne had said. Just an extra added chore because the new runt is a pathological liar.

Kyle walked to the sink and pulled out some of her special shirts that were soaking, too delicate for the mauling they'd get in the washer.

And Andy just stood there, watching her.

"Thanks a heap, Andy. This is exactly how I like to spend my Sunday. Stuck in a cellar, doing laundry with a liar. Thanks a lot."

"But I didn't break the statue," he said.

She looked at him. The naked light bulb caught his face, and for all her anger, she had to admit he looked a bit pathetic standing there.

"Yeah . . . ," she said. "Well," she went on, turning back to the washer, waiting to dump the fabric softener into the churning mixture. "Maybe it fell. Maybe a breeze . . ." She turned and looked at him. "Maybe an earthquake," she said, grinning. And he made the

smallest smile back.

She took a look upstairs, up to the door that led to the kitchen. And then she dug a pack of Marlboros from her back pocket. She lit one and sucked hard. She felt Andy watching her, brainwashed by hours of antismoking commercials.

God, now I'll have the kid ratting on me.

"Here, give me a hand hanging these shirts up on the line. I can't put them in the dryer."

Kyle pulled out one shirt covered with silver spangles, one of her favorites. It ate two of her pay checks, before she started saving for California. It should be dry cleaned, but that cost more money. Woolite was cheaper.

She draped it over the line. "Hand me some clothespins," she said. Andy dug a handful of them out of a bag. A few spilled to the floor. Kyle took one and clipped the shirt's collar onto the indoor line. Then Andy tried to pin the other side of the shirt, but Kyle saw that he had bunched the material up.

"No," she said. She reached up and took the cigarette out of her mouth. "Hold this," she said, handing him the cigarette. She pulled the collar and shoulder of the shirt taut.

When she turned, Andy was staring at the burning cigarette in his hand. Then she saw him bring it up to his lips, as if sipping something hot and biting. He took a puff and immediately started coughing.

"Andy," she said, reaching out and grabbing the cigarette from his flailing hand. He was still bent over coughing. "What do you think you're doing? God!"

"I . . ." He coughed again. "I wanted to taste it."

"And you do everything that you want to do? Get real, Andy. It tastes like garbage, okay. And you know how bad it is for you, right?"

He finally stopped hacking and stood watching her. "Then why do you do it?"

She went back to the clothesline, grabbing another shirt, a silky item, out of the sink. "Grown-ups are allowed to do things that are bad for them." She puffed on her cigarette, but it didn't taste all that great anymore. Not with Andy watching.

"But you're not a grown-up."

She stared at him. "You know, you're really starting to get on my nerves, Andy. Really . . . now the way you hang the clothes is like—"

She heard a sound. The door opening upstairs. Joanne or Big Phil. Coming down to inspect the prisoners.

She flicked the half-done cigarette into the sink, with her shirts and the gray, soapy water.

The door opened farther. She heard Joanne's voice. Kyle waved at the air, trying to fan away the smoke. Andy saw what she was doing and then helped, his arms windmilling. Kyle gave him a smile. Maybe he's not such a bad runt after all.

She heard Joanne's voice closer, at the top of the stairs, and then the door shut again. She must have picked up something from one of the shelves that were on the way down to the cellar.

"Thanks," Kyle said.

Andy came closer. She saw him look up the stairs. "Mr. Simpson . . . Phil is kind of grouchy, isn't he?"

"Grouchy? I don't know. I've had *worse* foster parents. Much worse. I could tell you some horror stories . . . Hey, and you'd be grouchy too if you sold insurance five days a week."

"What's insurance?"

Kyle shrugged. "You pay money, you see, so if something bad happens to you, someone else gets a lot of money."

"Why would you do that?"

Kyle stepped back from the clothesline.

"Beats me, kid. But he's not so bad. Believe me. There are some foster parents who would kill you for just looking cross-eyed at them."

"Really?"

"Sure. I mean, they figure that you're not *really* theirs. You're just passing through. And the minute you screw up, they let you have it." She leaned closer to Andy. "And I've gotten it real bad from some foster parents. That's why I'm getting out of here. That's why I'm saving money."

Andy nodded. And she saw that he was scared, standing in the dull light of the cellar, listening to the muffled voices of Joanne and Phil.

"Hey, why don't you go on up. Go outside and play. I'll finish up this stuff."

Andy smiled. He was a cute kid. If only he weren't a liar.

But then, she thought, maybe he's telling the truth.

And if he was telling the truth, how the hell did the statue fall?

She patted Andy's shoulder. "Go ahead. Before the spiders start jumping off the ceiling at you."

Andy quickly looked around the gloomy basement and Kyle laughed. "Go ahead . . ."

Andy turned and went upstairs . . .

* * *

Maybe Kyle isn't so bad, Andy thought, walking up the stairs. Maybe we could even be friends, he thought as he neared the door leading to the kitchen.

But as he got closer he heard Phil and Joanne talking in the kitchen. Talking about him.

He stopped, just a few steps from the door, and listened.

"How late were you up with him?"

It was Phil. He was talking loudly. As if he doesn't care if I hear, Andy thought.

"I'm fine," Joanne said. Her voice was quiet.

Then Phil, even louder, said, "No, you're not. You're exhausted."

Andy knew what that meant. Mom used that word when she came home from work. "I'm exhausted, Andy. I was on my feet all day and I'm . . ."

"Having second thoughts?" Joanne said. But Andy was having a hard time hearing her. He looked down to see if Kyle noticed him stopped on the stairs, listening. But she was at the clothesline. He took another step closer to the door.

"Well, hell . . . After last night you have to admit that he's one *very* troubled little boy. He might be more than we can handle."

Andy licked his lips. He thought of the center again, the kids with their bruises, the crying, the sound of heavy shoes moving in the hallway at night.

"He obviously hasn't come to terms with this doll thing. That's for sure."

It's the doll again, thought Andy. It's the Good Guy doll. It's not Chucky this time, but still it's getting me in trouble.

Chucky's gone. Destroyed.

Burned like a piece of bacon.

But this new doll . . .

Just a doll, that's all.

Tommy.

He's getting me in trouble, Andy thought, because I'm scared of him.

Phil's voice got low, and Andy could imagine Joanne's face looking sad. She likes me, he thought. Maybe she's my friend too.

"All I'm saying is . . . he may need more attention than we can give him. Professional attention. It's more than we can handle."

Andy felt frozen on the steps. He couldn't just walk into the kitchen now, smile at them, go outside and play on the swing.

And he couldn't go back downstairs.

"Look," he heard Joanne say. "He's been through hell, Phil. Just think about what he's seen. Can't we just give him some time? I know he'll settle down. It's a new house, and new people. Tomorrow there's school. He'll be busy and . . ."

Andy waited. Holding his breath.

"Besides, I like him."

And then there was silence. Maybe they were holding hands. Maybe they were even kissing.

Andy let his breath out.

"I like him," she had said. "I like him."

And Andy turned the doorknob and went into the kitchen.

13

Andy opened the basement door quickly, trying to act as if he had just hurried up the stairs.

Joanne and Phil both turned and smiled at him.

And Andy smiled back.

“All done, champ?” Phil asked.

Andy nodded. “Kyle, er, she’s just finishing a few of her shirts.”

Joanne stood up, pulling her robe tight. “Well then, you can go outside and play.”

Andy nodded. He forced a big smile and said, “I thought I’d play with Tommy, the Good Guy doll. I’ll take him on the swing.”

He saw Phil’s smile broaden even more.

“Good idea!” Joanne said.

Andy moved past them, out to the foyer, and on into the living room.

Now the room was drenched in sunlight, the morning light bouncing off the polished wood, reflecting from all the other statues.

He went right to the chair to get Tommy.

But the doll wasn’t there.

He stopped, frozen in his tracks. He thought of backing away, just running outside by himself.

The doll wasn’t there.

But they would wonder why he had changed his mind. Phil would wonder. Andy licked his lips and looked around the room. Finally he saw the doll sitting on the floor by the TV. He walked over to it slowly. Someone must have moved it. Maybe Joanne, maybe Kyle. Someone.

Still, an idea haunted him: Chucky moved. Sure. Chucky could get around and do stuff. Lots of stuff. Chucky could talk and run and . . .

Kill.

So why not this doll?

He walked up to it slowly. The wood floor creaked under the carpet with each step he took. He was in front of the doll. He knelt down. Close to it. And he whispered, “I hate you.”

The doll blinked. Its head swiveled, zeroing in right on Andy’s face. “Hi!” it sung out. “I’m . . .”

The next word didn't come right out. It hung there, inside the doll. Just for a second. Then:

". . . Tommy, and I'm your friend to the end. Hidey-ho, ha-ha-ha!"

Andy took a step backward. The doll went silent. He knew there was something to check. He heard sounds coming from outside the room, the sounds of Phil and Joanne cleaning up the kitchen. They'd come in here soon, and Andy didn't want them to see him standing there frozen, looking at the doll. He knelt down, quickly now, hurrying. He grabbed the doll by its midsection, roughly, squeezing it. He picked it up and turned it around. Then he pushed up the Good Guy T-shirt.

It felt damp. Just a bit. Just like when his mom put too many clothes in the dryer and they didn't quite completely dry. He flipped open the battery compartment and saw two batteries there. Everready.

Andy took a deep breath. There, he thought, this one has batteries. This one's just a toy.

He grabbed the doll by one ankle and started dragging it out of the living room. The doll's head banged against the floor, but Andy didn't worry that it bumped against the chairs and the legs of the end tables.

It's just a doll, he thought. A dumb old doll.

He saw Joanne and Phil coming out of the kitchen, arm in arm.

Perfect, he thought.

"Hi," he said as cheerily as he could.

"Hi," they said back, both smiling.

Phil can see me with the doll, Andy thought. He can see me playing with it.

"I'm going out to play," Andy said. "With Tommy!"

He opened the front door and dragged the doll outside, then down the steps and around to the backyard.

Chucky felt each bang, just as if he were in his own body and some wiseguy gorilla was putting the moves on him, hustling him for a late payment on his last big loan.

Bang! His head slapped against the floor. And bang! His plastic cheek smacked the coffee table leg.

The kid is doing this on purpose, he thought. Smacking me around. All on purpose.

And then Andy ran down the front porch stairs as fast as he could, letting Chucky's head trail behind. His head smacked each wooden step just a bit harder.

But that's okay, he thought. I don't mind the pain.

No. Time is getting short. Already I'm changing—too fast. But things are going along according to plan . . . just beautifully. Here I am, right next to Andy.

Christ! He's gotta keep me with him. Or old Phil and Joanne will get nervous. And we don't want that, Andy boy, now do we?

So what if he bangs me around? Soon he'll be in this stupid doll's body. And I'll be the real boy. It's a regular little Pinocchio story. And don't worry, Andy Barclay, after the change is all done, don't worry at all.

You can be *my* friend to the end.

I guarantee it.

Kyle played with the dirt, making small holes in the garden. Then she stuck in one of the bulbs that Joyce had given her.

"Grow!" she ordered it, grinning. "I can't believe this! Me, gardening?" She had as much interest in gardening as reading the books assigned in English class. Which is to say none.

But Joanne and Phil were big on gardening. Yeah, they probably think it's therapeutic, Kyle thought. Bending down, crouching near the dirt. Real therapeutic.

The only fun part, as far as she could see, was cutting the worms in half and watching the two halves wriggle away, in opposite directions. That was pretty neat.

She had always hated worms, ever since the cat food incident.

She didn't know how old she had been when it happened. Probably around three, she guessed. It was just before her mother had left. Old Mom had had a habit of disappearing for a long time, leaving Kyle all alone in their dark apartment.

She dug the spade into the dirt, carving out another irregular hole.

Mom left, and after Kyle stopped crying, after she *knew* that her mother wasn't coming back, she started exploring the apartment. During the day, the cartoons were all gone, and she had to find something else for fun. She turned the taps on in the bathroom sink. She remembered the sound of the water. And she played with her toys in there: a legless Barbie, a pudgy doll with a scuffed face.

Her mother was always gone for a long time.

The kitchen was always good, even if there wasn't much food in the refrigerator. Certainly nothing like cookies or ice cream. Just some milk, some cans, nothing that was fun to eat.

One day she saw the cat food.

The cat didn't stay around the apartment much. It went in and out

with Kyle's mom. Kyle looked at the plate of cat food. She remembered leaning down and getting close to it because, because . . .

Well, it looked weird. It was all dried brown and rusty. It had come out of the can all wet and gloppy, and now it was almost solid.

Kyle stuck a tulip bulb in a hole. She heard the side door open. Probably Joanne, she thought, or maybe Big Phil checking up on her.

She remembered touching the dried cat food. I guess it's what kids do, she thought. Touch things, even taste them . . .

Not that she *tasted* the cat food. She just stuck her finger against the crust, just a bit. I wanted to know what it felt like, she remembered.

The crust broke. She remembered giggling. And then her finger plunged into the dish, past the crusty covering, to a warm, wet mess below.

She had been laughing, but she pulled her finger out and saw things moving in the hole. She looked at her finger, and these things, these white things, were on her finger, wriggling, moving around.

She screamed. Though there was no one to hear her. She screamed as loud as she could.

She ran to the bathroom and turned on the tap, washing these . . . things off her finger. They're going to get me, she thought. They're going to crawl right under my fingernail. They'll get me. And turn me into cat food.

She grinned. At least, that's how she remembered it.

Kyle took a breath. Yeah, gardening's real therapeutic. She made a new hole and saw a baby worm try to wriggle away. She brought the small spade down and cut the tiny sucker in two.

Then she felt someone watching her.

She turned around to find Andy sitting on the swing, his feet dangling, not quite touching the ground. She also saw the doll that had freaked him out so much. It was sitting on a bit of wood that Phil kept saying he was going to cut up.

Andy was watching her, and she wondered, Hey, what am I? The morning's entertainment? She turned back to the small garden.

"Kyle?" Andy said. She looked back. "Kyle, do you ever miss your mom and dad?"

Now there's a dumb question, she thought. Maybe the absolute dumbest. I mean, really . . .

"Do you?" he repeated.

She took a breath and then stood up. She had big muddy stains at her knees. She looked up at the clear blue sky. After such a nasty

night, it certainly looked nice out. She decided that there was no way she'd let herself be grounded tonight.

She knew there were ways around that little problem. Phil and Joanne aren't the most aware couple that ever had my fate in their hands, she thought.

"You can't miss someone you never knew, Andy."

Andy kicked at the air with his feet. Kyle saw the worn dirt below him, looking sort of broken up.

"Where are they?" he asked. "How come you never knew them?"

She took some steps away from the garden. "I have no idea where they are now. And frankly," she tossed the spade back to the garden, "I couldn't care less. My old man left before I was born. And my mother—she put me up for adoption when I was three. She was having some 'troubles.' "

Andy nodded. "Do you remember her?"

"I make a point of trying to forget." She walked up to the swing and grabbed the ropes. "It's easier that way. Trust me. You'll be better off forgetting too."

Andy shook his head. "My mom's going to come and get me . . . just as soon . . ."

She looked at his face. He believed that, she guessed. And for all she knew it might be true. Anyway, she thought, it's not my job to trash his fantasy.

"Break time," she announced. "Move your butt over."

She tried to squeeze on the seat next to him, but instead Andy popped off, jumping down onto the dirt.

And again Kyle noticed how chewed up it was, as if the rain had ripped it up, or maybe an animal.

"I'll push you!" Andy squealed, running around to the back of the swing, laughing.

"No thanks," Kyle said. But she felt Andy grab the back of the seat and begin to shove it, just a bit forward, then back, and then a bit more.

She dragged her foot against the ground, slowing him. "Come on," he said. "It's fun."

Kyle let her foot dangle as he pushed harder and harder. She heard him suck at the air, grunting, getting her moving. The tips of her sneakers scratched against the bare dirt below the swing, back and forth.

And as Kyle swung, she thought of her date that night.

She noticed nothing . . . else.

Scrape. Scrape. Scrape.

He heard the girl's foot, the toe gliding back and forth over the dirt. Back and forth, moving some of the dirt away, some of the freshly dug dirt.

Slowly Chucky turned his head, just a bit, just enough to see her sitting on the swing.

Another push from Andy, the little brat, and her toe gouged out a big chunk of dirt. It went flying into the air.

It looks like the brat is trying to dig it up, Chucky thought. As if she *knows* the doll is there. The doll with the smashed head. Tommy. The doll that would make everyone wonder . . . If this is Tommy, who's this other doll?

"Andy, stop!" the girl squealed, laughing. She's enjoying her ride, Chucky thought. Isn't that nice. The boy pushed her harder, sending her higher and higher.

Scrape. Scrape. Scrape.

Oh the damn brat, Chucky thought. I'll take care of you too. Don't you worry about it.

On the off-chance they'd notice the change in his appearance, Chucky moved his head back, looking straight ahead again, a big smile on his wide-eyed face, listening to the sound of the swing . . . and Kyle's shoe chewing at Tommy's grave.

14

Joanne leaned closer to Andy so he could see the picture in the book. It felt wonderful to be reading a bedtime story.

Humpty Dumpty was on the ground surrounded by a bunch of confused onlookers who clearly didn't know what to do with a broken egg.

"And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again."

She watched Andy study the picture. He put a hand on a corner of the book and tilted it down to see better. Sitting close to him, in his bed, Joanne could smell his clean hair from his long bath. It had been a good day. He had played outside, and she had heard him laughing with Kyle. At dinner, everyone seemed happy. Almost like a real family, she thought. Even Kyle was so sweet, so polite.

Andy flopped back on his pillow.

Right beside Tommy. He and the doll seemed inseparable now. And that, she thought, was good. It would make Phil feel so much better. There's nothing wrong with this boy that a little love won't fix.

She looked at her watch and then shut the book.

"And they all lived happily ever after," she said.

Andy held the bedclothes tight against his chin. "No, they don't," he said.

Joanne smiled at him. "What do you mean, Andy? Of course they do."

"Did you see Humpty?" He grinned. "I don't think he'll be living happily ever after."

She smiled. "Well, they do for now. We'll read some more tomorrow night, okay?" She ran a hand across his fine hair. He nodded and smiled, squeezing his eyes shut.

She reached over and turned out the bedside lamp. And in the sudden darkness, for a moment, all she could see was the doll's glistening marble eyes. A pale blue glow from the night-light was blocked by the bed.

"Remember," she said. "Kyle is in the next room . . . and we're just down the hall. If you need us, for anything, just holler. Deal?" Andy opened his eyes and nodded. "We'll be here in three seconds flat."

She leaned close, hesitated a moment, but then kissed Andy on the

forehead.

"Good night, M—" He hesitated. And then said, "Good night, Joanne."

"Good night, Andy."

I wish he had said it, she thought. I wish he had said that word.

Mom.

She smiled at him. Before she got up she straightened the bedclothes around Andy and then around the doll. She rubbed the doll's head, feeling the stiff, synthetic hair. "I'm glad to see you've made a friend here."

She saw a bit of a smile on Andy's face. Then she stood up and left the room.

He counted, waiting for Joanne to walk down the hall and then down the stairs. He listened for her voice talking to Phil. She's nice, he thought. I'm lucky. Kyle says that there are a lot of mean—really mean—foster parents. But Joanne is nice. And Phil, well, he's okay.

He waited until he was sure Joanne was all the way downstairs. Then he slid out of the warm bed, dragging Tommy behind him, pulling the doll by its hair.

Guess I got a new friend, Joanne had said.

She has that wrong, he thought.

He hurried to the chest of drawers and opened the bottom drawer, empty except for a few pairs of socks. He pushed Tommy into the drawer and then slammed it shut. It didn't shut all the way. Something—a hand, maybe a foot—caught, but Andy hurried back to the safety of his bed. He pulled his covers tight and shut his eyes.

Now I can sleep, he thought.

He lay there, trying not to think bad things . . . things that would keep him up.

But he heard a sound. A thumping sound.

From over there. From over by the dresser.

His eyes popped open. "No," he whispered—prayed. Please, no, he thought. I'm just imagining this. That's all.

He leaned up, looking into the darkness. The blue night-light lit only a tiny spot on the wall by the foot of the bed. He couldn't even see the bureau.

I've got to look, he told himself. *I've got to.* 'Cause if I don't, maybe the doll will come to life and get out of there, in the middle of the night.

I have to make sure.

He would have liked to reach out and turn on the light. But Joanne or Phil might see that. Besides, with the night-light he could see pretty well, he told himself.

And he saw the drawer closed tight.

I thought it got stuck earlier, he thought. It didn't close all the way . . . did it?

He slid out of bed. The wood floor was cold on his feet. He started for the bureau, but then he stopped and grabbed a magnifying glass on the end table. He had played with it that afternoon, looking at all sorts of things: the grain on the wood, the forest inside the carpet downstairs, the jungle in the grass.

He moved closer to the bureau, and when he got there he reached down for the handle on the bottom drawer. He took a breath.

Please be there, he thought. *Please be there.*

He pulled it open as fast as he could.

And the doll was there, lying face up with that same stupid expression on its face.

Andy started breathing again. He leaned forward, the magnifying glass held out in front of him. He moved closer until he was right over the doll's face. He suspended the magnifying glass right over one of the doll's eyes, and then the other. They seemed to catch the blue light, and they sparkled with a deep blue glow, like the sky at night, filled with stars.

It's just a doll, Andy told himself for the thousandth time.

And then he blinked.

And the head turned to him.

He tried not to yell, to squeal.

"Hey, wanna play?" it said. Andy dug around to the back of the doll. He felt the battery compartment, and he fiddled with the latch. The small door popped open and he felt the two big batteries.

"No," Andy whispered to it. He shut the battery compartment and again slammed the chest drawer closed.

He ran back to the bed, back to the cold sheets, thinking, Now I'll be able to sleep.

Joanne stopped the sewing machine. She thought she heard something. But then the wind blew against the window. A tiny breeze sneaked through a crack.

She leaned forward and pulled the drapes across the window.

Then Phil announced, "There we go, babe. Good as new."

She turned and looked at the statue. From across the master

bedroom, she couldn't see the web of cracks that covered it. It had been one of her favorites, for what she knew must be very transparent reasons.

"Now, just have to . . ." Phil started lowering the repaired statue to the small rolltop desk near the bed. ". . . let it set for a year or two."

He gingerly slid it onto the desk. "There," he said happily. "Good as old!"

But then Joanne heard the statue land against the wood, a loud sound, and the mother holding her child fell apart, some pieces flaking off, while others, covered with the porcelain glue, melted away.

"Damn," he said. He looked up at Joanne. "I was being so careful . . ."

"Never mind," she said. "Give it up, honey."

Phil looked down at the pieces lying on the table. "It's worth a lot of money."

"It *was* worth a lot of money. Now it's a wreck."

She saw that Phil looked as disappointed as she felt. She picked up her handiwork from the insectlike nose of her Singer portable. "Hey, how do you like this?"

Phil stood up and walked over to her. "What is it?" he said.

"It's a blouse." She laughed. "See, the arms will go here and there. And the front—"

"Oh, I see it now." He rubbed his hands on his sweat pants, and dried glue flaked off his fingertips.

"It's for Kyle," she said. "Think she'll like it?"

He shrugged. "Hey, what do I know about teenage girls?"

"A lot more than you did three weeks ago."

He walked away and then fell back on the bed. "I'm not too sure about that."

She put the blouse down and followed him.

"Phil, I've been thinking that maybe . . ." She came to the side of the bed, standing next to Phil. "That we could get something for Andy, something to make him welcome."

Phil looked up, grinning. "How about a Valium?"

"Very funny. But I mean it. He's such a sweet boy, away from his mom. And he gets scared so easily, I . . ."

She looked down at Phil. Her husband had started staring straight ahead, and then he opened his mouth, curling back his lips to expose his fangs. He stuck his arms out. "I'm coming to get you," he said in a low near-Transylvanian accent. "And then I'll get the boy."

“Phil!” She laughed. He stood up and started lumbering toward her. She stood there, letting his zombie arms encircle her, while he prepared to nuzzle her neck. “You have such beautiful veins for sucking blood . . . ,” he said.

She giggled as he kissed her neck and turned her around, ready to throw her down on the bed and, she guessed, ravish her in classic B-movie fashion . . .

He wriggled in the drawer.

It wouldn’t open. It was like some kind of Chinese trick door. I’m in here—now how the hell do I get out?

He rolled his body—his plump, little doll’s body that seemed to have more and more feeling—back and forth, rattling around.

But the damn drawer didn’t budge.

Okay, he thought. Not the first time I’ve been in a tight spot. Just have to concentrate . . . relax.

He brought his hands up to the top of the drawer. He felt the wood bars running over the drawer, and then the bottom of the drawer just overhead.

There, he thought. I’ve got an idea.

He grabbed one of those struts and used it to inch his drawer open. For a moment it seemed too heavy to move. But then he felt it slide just a bit.

Nothing like a little concentration to solve a problem.

He grinned. Concentration can be your best friend. And he thought, with pleasure, about the first offering he had made to Damballa . . .

* * *

The woman had turned out to be stronger than he had imagined. She actually fought back, punching at his face, his balls, before she ran down the stairwell, screaming.

People would come out of their apartments, he worried. And that would spoil the sacrifice.

But it was too late. Rabbit people mind their own business. Good, God-fearing, tax-paying wimps mind their own small-minded business.

That was one of the first things he had learned.

So he took his time chasing her, letting her think she might get away, down the stairs, then through the basement. Why would she go in the basement, he wondered. But then he figured out a reason.

And all because he took time to concentrate, to think. Yes, he thought, she was going to run through the basement to another set of

stairs, and then into the other side of the building. Right up those stairs . . . to the elevator, to her apartment, to safety.

He nearly tripped over her high-heel shoes on the way down. But he didn't follow her beyond that. Instead, he stopped. He ran back up.

And he was there, waiting for her, when she started coming up the other side of the building. It was too funny! She nearly ran into him. She almost—he smiled at this—thought he was a neighbor, someone who could help her. But one look at him and she dropped that notion.

I don't look like a neighbor, he thought. Too many nights sleeping with the rats. Too many winters wearing layers and layers of other people's clothes to keep warm. Dead people's clothes. Filled with their smell. Sometimes even the smell of their fear.

He actually liked that smell, but no, he didn't look like anybody's neighbor.

She backed away. And Charles Lee Ray began saying those words taught him by the holy man, the *gris-gris* shaman who had taught him about the power.

Never for humans, he had said. It would be an abomination to do the ritual sacrifice with humans.

Not for what I want to do, Charles Lee Ray thought.

The woman screamed. He saw that she wasn't young, but she was strong. Maybe she was a jogger, maybe a weight-lifter. Now she cowered in the stairwell, cornered.

He finished the first prayer.

Damballa gora stamba, keynu!

Mighty Damballa, grant me the power.

And he felt the *gris-gris*—the dark magic—all through his body, almost sexual, as his hands closed around the woman's neck.

And he repeated the chant, over and over, louder than the woman's sputtering. Even her kicks didn't bother him. This was just too wonderful.

And it was only the beginning.

His patient work was rewarded. The drawer was open. He saw a bluish light, the window, and the outline of Andy's bed.

He waited a moment—just to make sure that the little bastard wasn't there, waiting for him, ready to ram an ice pick into his nice new head.

Then he sat up.

Chucky relaxed his face, that stupid doll face, letting the puffy-smile cheeks go flat. He saw the top of the bed and Andy's sleeping body

only a few feet away. *He’s asleep,* Chucky thought. Perfect. I have all the time in the world.

He thought happily of the first thing he’d do, right after the change. Yes, right after he took over Andy’s body, and poor Andy’s soul was forever imprisoned in the Good Guy. Why, he thought, I’ll just have to smash the doll into a million pieces. I’m sure any shrink would understand my anger.

Chucky grinned in the eerie glow.

15

Phil worked his hands under her faded Northwestern U shirt, expertly covering both her breasts. He tweaked her nipples too roughly.

But then Joanne thought that maybe she just wasn't in the mood.

His knee was grinding away in her crotch. He nibbled her ear.

But then he stopped and leaned back. He gave her a long, hard look. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing," she said, turning away.

But she knew he wouldn't buy that. She wasn't a prissy lover. He liked to joke that it wasn't at all hard to get her motor going. And that was true. And now . . .

"Come on. Yes, there *is* something wrong. What is it?"

She sighed. "That woman called—the one from the adoption agency . . ."

He waited, to let her get the story out.

"She said that . . ." Now she looked away. "We were turned down again."

He touched her cheek. She wished he hadn't done that. She couldn't stand him being sweet and gentle, not now. Not today.

"Honey," he said. "I'm sorry."

"The woman said that there just aren't that many kids to be had. We're still on a wait list. If they get a good match up, someone that they . . ."

Phil sat up and shook his head. "Damn, how long have we been on that wait list? For over a year? And what else do you have to prove to them? You've quit your job, you take these kids in from the center, you stay here and take care of other children. And you get your heart broken every time. What the hell else do they want to see?"

"They know all that. It's in our folder. But . . . we just have to wait . . . like everyone else."

Phil stood up. He walked to the desk and fingered the broken statue. "Yeah, well I *hate* waiting." He turned back to Joanne. "And I hate seeing you go through this over and over." He paused. And she knew what he was going to say next. "It has to stop, Joanne. It's just too painful, for you."

But she sat up and shook her head. "No, Phil. I'm still . . . happy. I love taking these kids in. Honest! We're making a difference in their

lives, a real difference. Look at Andy. He needs our love, our home. And he's trying so hard to fit in and please us. I think he really likes it here . . . he really likes us."

Phil shook his head.

Then he said, "I'm happy if you're happy."

She smiled. "I am. You'll see. Everything's going to turn out fine . . . just fine . . ." She raised her arms to her husband.

And Phil smiled and walked back to their bed.

There was something wrong.

Andy tried to breathe through his mouth. But he felt something, tasted something inside his mouth. He tried to move, but something was holding him.

Just another nightmare, he thought.

But then he opened his eyes.

And he saw the sock—one of his socks—stuffed in his mouth, bulging out of his face like a giant wart. And his hands and feet were tied to the bed.

He felt something moving on his chest.

He tried to squeal, to cry out, but only the smallest muffled sound escaped the sock.

The thing on his chest moved, crawling up close to his face, closer, until he saw the head, outlined in blue.

"Surprise!" Chucky said.

"No," Andy cried, but the sock muffled it. Then he begged God. Please . . . don't let this be happening.

The doll's body felt heavy on his chest. It was real . . . *real!*

Andy snorted at the air. He tried pulling against the sheets that held him fast to the bed. But he only made his wrists and ankles hurt.

Chucky leaned real close to him. Andy smelled him—the plastic, and a wet smell.

"Did you miss me, Andy? I sure missed you."

Please, God, let this be a dream, Andy thought. Just another dumb nightmare. But it all felt too real—the sheets knotted to his wrists, the chunky body sitting on him. *This was real.*

He started to cry.

I thought it was over. I thought it was all . . .

"I told you we're friends to the end. And now, it's time to play."

He watched the doll face break into a mean smile. And Andy could see those teeth, those shiny white plastic teeth that were so good at

biting.

He watched the teeth move up and down.

"I've got a new game, sport. It's called 'Hide the Soul.' And guess what? You're *it."*

The grin grew wider and Andy screamed. But almost no sound escaped the sock in his mouth.

He watched Chucky reach out a hand toward his head. He's going to kill me, Andy thought. He'll strangle me. He's strong, and he'll wrap his hands around my neck, and maybe he'll bite me.

But all Chucky did was touch Andy's forehead.

Andy could strain his eyes upward and see the plastic hand pressing against his head, and the T-shirt, the stripes so dull in the dark room.

He looked back to Chucky's face. The doll blinked and then seemed to look up.

"Ade due Damballa . . . ," Chucky said.

Andy knew what Chucky was doing. I'm the one he needs, Andy knew. He needs my body . . . and I'll be, I'll be . . .

"Ade due Damballa, *kenyu due* Damballa!"

Andy writhed in the bed, squirming like an eel he had once caught in the Hudson River when he visited his Uncle Jack. It was a big black eel, and it twisted and turned, shimmering black, until it finally spit out the hook and then went crazy in the bottom of the boat. Uncle Jack laughed and threw it back into the river.

But Chucky will never let me go, Andy thought. He needs me.

But then Andy heard another sound, at the window. A rattling. The window moving.

Chucky froze.

And then Andy saw hands, and a face, and . . .

It was Kyle! She was sneaking into the house. He watched her press her hands against the window, forcing it up.

Chucky leaned close to him again.

"This isn't over, you little shit. Not by a long shot. I'm not gonna spend the rest of my life as a stupid doll." Chucky gave Andy's face a hard squeeze. "The next time you're alone, *you're mine."*

The window flew open, and Chucky became still, his face freezing into a peaceful smile. Andy watched Kyle step quietly into the room.

She probably thought I'd be asleep, Andy knew. She climbed right up the trellis into my room. Then he thought, Chucky's going to get her. He'll wait until she's in the room and leap up and . . .

Andy started twisting and turning again. Chucky rolled to the side, flat now on Andy's chest.

Kyle stepped into the room and then heard Andy's grunting sounds. She looked down at the bed.

"Oh my god!" she whispered. "What the . . ."

She pulled the sock out of Andy's mouth.

He gasped and then shouted, "It's Chucky!" He tried to warn her with his eyes. "Look out! He's going to get you."

Kyle untied his hands. "Will you shut up? You'll wake Phil and Joanne. What happened to you? Is this a trick you learned how to do or is the Manson family partying downstairs?"

She doesn't see, Andy thought. She doesn't know that Chucky can just reach up and grab her. He can kill her in seconds. His hands were only inches away from her throat. She untied the other hand. "Kill him!" Andy shrieked. "You have to kill him."

"An-dy, quiet. You'll wake up Phil and Joanne and I'll catch hell. Now stop it, before—"

"Kill him!" Andy shrieked. His hands were free, and he pushed the doll down to the other end of the bed. "K—"

The door flew open and Phil rushed in. He turned the light on. "What the—"

Kyle shot up straight, and Andy saw a sheepish grin on her face. She's only worried about being caught, Andy knew. That's all she cares about. She doesn't believe me about Chucky.

"You didn't have to wait up," Kyle said.

Joanne pushed past Phil, hurrying into the room. "Andy, what's happened to you?"

"It's Chucky! I told you he'd find me," Andy cried. "He tried to take my soul . . . He's going to try again."

Joanne sat on the bed and held Andy close. "Shh," she said. "Don't worry, Andy. It was just another dream."

"But it wasn't a dream," he wailed. They have to believe me, he thought. Somehow I have to make them believe me!

He saw Phil shaking his head. "You've really outdone yourself this time, Kyle. Sneaking out when you're grounded is bad enough. But"—he pointed to the twisted bedsheets—"tying up a little kid so he doesn't blow the whistle? That's a new low . . ."

"Oh, come on, Phil. Do you really think that I . . ."

Andy struggled away from Joanne. "Chucky did it. It was . . ."

He looked at the doll, sitting lifelessly against the wall now. Just a doll. Just a silly old doll.

Joanne put her arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. "Shh, Andy. That's enough for now."

Phil shook his head. “Oh, brother. That does it.”

Andy saw Phil look at Joanne. His face was angry and mean. He’d like to get rid of me, Andy thought. He wants me out of the house.

Phil picked up the Good Guy doll. And Andy yelped like a puppy when he saw Phil handling Chucky.

It *is* Chucky, he thought. I know it’s Chucky. Somehow he lived. And he’s found me. Please, Mom. Come and get me. Get me away from Chucky. Please.

“Y—you’ve got to kill him,” Andy said.

Phil nodded. “Right. Sure.” Phil turned and started walking away with the doll. Andy squirmed away from Joanne.

“Andy!” she called.

But Andy ran to the doorway and followed Phil.

“You’ve got to kill him. Please! Believe me.”

Andy got to the stairs, and he saw Phil moving down, holding Chucky. “Please listen to me! I’m not lying! Please!”

Andy hesitated, and then he started down the stairs, the dark stairs, following Phil. He felt the carpet under his feet scratching at his toes, the soles of his feet. At the bottom of the stairs, he saw Phil turn and head for the kitchen.

Where’s he going? Andy wondered. What is he going to do?

“Please,” Andy called to him. He didn’t want to follow Phil into the kitchen. It was so dark in there, and he was alone with Chucky. “Please listen to me. I’m not lying . . . I’m not . . .”

And stopped in the foyer. He heard a door open. He chewed at his lip, and then, after taking a big breath, he ran into the kitchen.

Phil was at the cellar door, and there was a light on.

He shouldn’t go down there, Andy knew. He shouldn’t go down there with Chucky.

“If you don’t kill him, he’ll come and get me!”

Phil stopped and turned to face Andy. He still held the doll, dangling it from its feet. The light from behind Phil made it impossible to see his face. Was he mad, was he smiling?

Or was he listening?

“Andy,” Phil said quietly. “Calm down. I’m going to get rid of the doll. You won’t ever see the doll again.”

Andy took another few tentative steps inside the kitchen. The floor was cold, and he saw a milky white light outside, in the backyard. “You have to kill him,” Andy said quietly. “You have to kill him . . . in his heart. Or he’ll . . .”

Phil nodded. “I’ll get rid of him. Andy. Don’t worry. It will be all

right.

Andy nodded. He backed away. It was too cold here, too dark. And he didn't like the strange light outside.

Phil turned away and brought the doll back, almost as if he were going to swing it at Andy. But then he threw it down, into the cellar.

Andy stood there, listening to Chucky hit one step and then tumble down the rest of the way.

Phil reached up and pulled the string.

And they were both in the dark.

* * *

I'll get you too, Chucky thought while he was still cartwheeling through the air.

Yes, he thought again with the first thump on the wooden steps, I'll take care of you, Mr. Suburbanite. We'll fix your wagon. And your stupid little wife too.

Lots of things we can do here.

He banged down the steps, head over heels, each thwap sending another reminder that his soul was being locked into this made-in-Taiwan body. Then, finally, his head cracked against the concrete floor of the cellar, and he nearly screamed from the pain.

He was in the dark. The light was off, and the door was slammed shut. He heard Phil call but, "He's gone now, Andy. Okay? He can't bother you anymore."

Chucky heard something else as well. Something down here . . . chittering and moving, right down here. And now—this was a first, sports fans—there were smells. He was smelling again! Dank, wet smells. Nearly as bad as that rat hole he had shared with Eddie Caputo. Poor Eddie.

If Eddie hadn't left him behind, none of this would have happened. And Eddie had to pay a big ticket price for that error in judgment. Poor bastard got spooked and fired his gun when he didn't know the gas was on. It was instant tenement removal, rats and all.

That's what Eddie was . . . just another big rat.

Chucky reached behind and felt the crack in his head. Ow, that was nasty. A real split in the skull. But he noticed, as he sat up, that it didn't appear to affect his thought processes at all.

Then he felt something wet drip onto the top of his overalls.

Oh, shit, no, he thought. Not again.

He reached his hand around and felt his bloody, wet nose. He looked at his fingers, catching the pitiful amount of light in this

dungeon.

He heard tiny feet, sniffing close to him.

More blood. It's getting late, too late! It has to be tomorrow or I'll be trapped, he thought.

The feet scuttled closer. He thought he felt wiry hairs brush against his back. The rats must sniff the blood, he thought. They must get a bit hungry down here.

The rat came closer, and its hairs stuck through the material of his shirt. He smelled the fetid breath of the animal. It must eat some pretty weird garbage down here.

Chucky waited, just a few seconds, before he turned around and grabbed the rat around its neck. It twisted in his hands, which were strong and powerful.

"No, I got you," Chucky screamed at it.

The rat tried working its needle-nosed snout around to chew at Chucky's hand. But Chucky bowed his arms out so just the hands held the rat and it couldn't bite anything.

The rat coughed and Chucky increased the pressure. He heard more sounds, more chittering and movement. The other rats were moving in for the kill. Chucky pressed harder until he thought he heard something snap.

A wet goo leaked out of the rat's nostrils, over Chucky's hands, and onto the stone floor.

"Man, that's gross," he hissed. And he threw the rat off into the corner. He heard the other animals swarm after it.

He guessed that they wouldn't be bothering him for the rest of his short stay down here.

16

Joanne did her best to act normal. She had bags under her eyes and more and more she was beginning to think that Phil was right. Andy might be too much of a problem for them. Even Kyle was too much. She thought about the broken statue, the shattered mother, the baby.

Maybe, she admitted, it was time to put away my fantasy of being a mother.

Andy was waiting at her elbow for her to finish putting his sandwich in a baggie. She slid the bagged sandwich inside a brown bag with a banana and a granola bar.

“There you go,” she said, smiling.

Andy didn’t smile back.

“Come on,” she heard Kyle call from the front door. “We’re late, for crying out loud.”

Joanne stepped close to Andy. This has to be a tough day for him, she thought. Brand new school, new kids. And . . .

She reached out and touched his shoulders. “Andy, have a good day.”

He nodded.

She kept smiling, but the boy’s face was grim, set; his eyes kept shifting over to the cellar door.

He’s obsessed, she thought. And for the first time she wondered if those other stories she had heard could be true.

Someone killed that baby-sitter.

She looked at him.

Could it have been . . . ?

“Andy!” Kyle yelled.

Joanne smiled again, forcing the cloud away. She pulled him close and planted a kiss on the top of his head. “Better go,” she whispered.

He seemed so sweet, she thought. She went to the kitchen window and watched him run to catch up with Kyle at the curb.

Phil had said he was going to call the center about Kyle today. She can’t stay, he said. Not after what she had done.

Joanne watched them walk away, golden in a brilliant morning sun. The way it would be if they were my kids, she thought—making lunches, kissing them good-bye.

Then they were gone, and she turned away from the window.

She saw the cellar door.

The doll was down there.

"Chucky did it," Andy had screamed. "You've got to kill him."

Kyle swore that she hadn't had anything to do with it. The whole thing was just like . . .

Someone grabbed her elbow. And Joanne made a small yelping sound and then turned to see Phil, who planted a kiss on her neck.

"An egg shake?" she offered distractedly.

But he shook his head. "No, sweets, I'm running late. Big meeting first thing. I'll grab an oat bran muffin from Pedro's cart."

He started for the front door and she followed.

"Are you going to call the center?" she asked, so very quietly.

Phil scooped up his attaché case on his way out to the driveway, and then kept on going. "Yes," he said. Joanne followed him outside. "Yes, because we haven't gotten a decent night's sleep since that boy got here, Joanne. We can't live this way." He got to his car and stopped. "I can't live this way."

"So what are you suggesting we do?" She squinted in the sun. She knew the answer he would give.

"You don't have to make it sound so horrible. It just didn't . . ." He popped open his car door. ". . . work out."

She reached out and grabbed his arm. "Do you know how horrible that will be for him? To have to go back there?"

"Traumatic for him . . . or you, Joanne?" She turned away. He was serious this time. But she felt him touch her back. "Hey, I'm sorry, Joanne. I've supported you in this whole foster parents thing. But I'm worried about you . . . about us. He'd have to leave eventually. So would Kyle. They all do. They don't belong to us."

"I know that. Believe me, *I know that."* She turned back to him. She took his hand in hers. "I just think we can help him. He's so scared, and so alone. It's not fair."

"It's more than we can handle," Phil said emphatically. "We tried, but he's a special kid. He needs special help." He got into the car. "It's way out of our league." Phil shut the door and then rolled down the window.

Joanne nodded and then leaned close to kiss him. She watched while he started the engine and backed down the driveway. He gave her a final wave before he roared off down the sun-bleached street.

Joanne pulled her robe close and turned back, slowly, to the house.

But then she stopped.

There, in the driveway, she saw pieces of glass. A big piece, then smaller pieces scattered around. She looked up at the living-room window, then up to the bedroom windows, but everything looked intact.

She knelt down to get a better look at the glass pieces.

She picked the big piece up carefully in her hands, noticing the trace of green paint near one edge. Then she looked straight ahead, at the recessed window of the cellar, at the splintery green window frame.

One of the panes was broken.

As if a baseball had sailed into it. No, not a baseball. More like a volleyball.

She shook her head. No, it didn't look like something had crashed into it.

It looked like something had crashed *out.*

But she stood up, and beyond making a note to call the glazier, she thought no more about the broken window.

"Will you move your butt?"

Andy looked up and saw Kyle, waiting for him at the corner. He looked back at the house, thinking about Joanne alone with Chucky. She should believe me, he thought. She's in danger . . . They're all in danger.

"Come on!" Kyle yelled. Andy jogged along the clean sidewalk in the bright sun. This was so different from the city, where there was garbage everywhere, where the streets were filled with wads of dried gum and cigarettes.

He jogged up next to Kyle.

"You know, you're going to miss your bus, squirt. And I'm going to be late for school." Kyle reached out and pulled him by the collar until he was right next to her. Then she hurried him around the corner and down the block.

Andy looked ahead and saw a line of kids waiting. "The bus stops right here at eight-thirty," Kyle said, "which means that it will be here any second. They don't wait for you and Joanne can't drive you." She looked down at him, her face all squinty and mad. "So don't be late 'cause they'll blame me."

Andy nodded. And he felt something. As if he was being watched. As if somewhere back at the corner, near a clump of bushes . . .

He turned around. But there was nothing there, just the bright, blinding sun bouncing off the white houses, the clean sidewalk, the flat black street.

“Hey, what are you looking for?” Kyle said.

He turned back quickly. “Nothing,” he said.

She leaned close to him, an evil smile on her face. “Are you afraid Chucky is coming to get you?”

She spoke quietly, but Andy saw the other kids looking over, wondering who the new kid was, he guessed. Wondering what Kyle was saying.

Maybe they know I’m just a foster kid.

He shook his head. And then he heard the distant roar of a bus. His mom always took him to school—he never took a school bus. Now he heard this terrible groaning sound in the distance. He couldn’t see the bus, but a low rumble filled the air. The other kids started jostling for places on line. He saw one boy with a short, wiry haircut push a smaller kid out of the way. Then the kid with the short haircut laughed.

Not a nice kid, Andy guessed.

Kyle was still there, still close to him.

“Hey, Andy boy. Tell me one thing. How did you manage to tie yourself up last night? That was one gnarly trick.”

The roar of the bus grew, and even blocks away, Andy saw the yellow shape take the corner and come charging toward him.

“I already told you,” he said. “I told you what happened.”

“Oh, right.” Kyle laughed. She backed away from him. “Get real.”

The bus seemed to be going too fast to ever stop in front of the line of kids. But then with a great squeal of its brakes, it stopped right at the head of the line. The doors whooshed open and the kids filed in.

Andy started for the line . . . but then turned to Kyle. “I know you don’t believe me,” he said. “No one believes me. You’re just like everyone else!”

He stepped onto the bus and took another look at Kyle. Her face had changed. She wasn’t grinning, and there wasn’t a nasty sneer on her face. She looked . . .

He went up another step, and the door closed. While Kyle kept looking at him.

She looked . . . *worried.* Like the way his mother had looked the time he had the flu and Mom didn’t go to work. She just sat by his bed, read to him, and felt his brow.

“Take a seat,” the driver snapped.

Andy turned around. The driver held a plastic cup filled with something hot. A thin smoky cloud rose from the cup. Andy nodded and moved down the aisle, following the other kids.

The bus was crowded. Most of the kids were already sitting together, talking to each other, laughing.

Andy felt very alone. He saw an empty seat ahead. But the kid next to it was the mean kid with the short haircut. Andy thought of moving to the back, but he felt the driver’s eyes on him, waiting for him to sit so he could take them all to school.

Andy started to move into the seat. And the kid quickly brought up his leg, covering the seat. He grinned at Andy, an ugly grin. And the kid had something in his hand, something that he started to throw at Andy.

Andy backed away, against the seat across the aisle. Kids yelled at him and gave him a push back the other way.

And the grinning kid shot a yo-yo out at Andy.

Andy fell back again before he saw the yo-yo stop and roll back into the kid’s hand. The kid laughed.

It was a Good Guy yo-yo. Andy saw the Good Guy face on the side. He turned around quickly. All the kids were laughing at him.

The driver yelled, “Take a seat!”

Andy looked at the back. He saw an empty seat all the way in the back. Next to a small boy who was siting quietly with a Good Guy lunch box held tightly on his lap.

He’s everywhere, Andy thought, hurrying to the seat. Chucky’s face is everywhere.

He took his seat.

The kids clapped rudely. And the bus grunted and pulled away, taking Andy to his new school.

There were moments when Chucky thought that the brat could feel him there, waiting in the bushes, hiding behind parked cars, following him.

We’re close, the two of us, he thought. We’re regular little blood brothers.

He watched Andy talking with Kyle. Soon to be *my* big sister, he thought happily. We’ll be able to do lots of things together.

He knew he couldn’t wait for the little brat to get home. There just wasn’t that kind of time to squander.

He examined his hand where the fingers had been smashed in the trunk. They throbbed like real fingers! No, time was running out.

The best solution would have been to get one of the other kids to bring him right on the bus. What kid wouldn’t pick up a lost Good Guy doll? Something for show and tell. But how could he do that?

Just lie on the sidewalk and wait for one of the squirts to bring him on the bus? No, that was too risky. They might take me back to their house, he thought, lock me in some closet with Candy Land and old soccer shoes.

No, he saw, there was only one way.

He rode the axle.

After all, he was the right size and—for all his bleeding and pain—he was practically indestructible. And after the first terrible minutes, with the bus's smelly exhaust billowing around him, it wasn't so bad, holding onto the axle, his feet dangling just inches above the street.

I'm going back to school, he thought. I learned you can't get anywhere without a good education.

When the bus stopped, Chucky hung there, hiding behind the wheels. He watched Andy and the others trooping off to the schoolyard. When he heard the whoosh of the bus's door shutting, he hurried to some bushes near the school fence.

Now *this* was a problem.

Can't just go marching in there. Probably get stopped by the hall monitor. Gotta pass, little fella? No, but I can squeeze your nuts real good . . . if you'll just bend down here.

No. He decided to wait. To think. To concentrate. A good solution would present itself.

The school bell rang and the playground emptied.

While Chucky crouched under a bush, his hands dug into the chain-link fence, planning his next move.

17

The teacher's name was Miss Kettlewell, and she wasn't at all like his *real* first-grade teacher, back at his old elementary school. His real teacher was young and smiled a lot. She always led the kids in funny songs and had great art activities to do.

This woman, Andy thought, was like a witch. She must be at least a hundred years old. She didn't smile at him when he was brought to the class by the principal, a man who seemed very, very busy. She just nodded to him and pointed to a desk. Even the principal seemed scared of her.

Then Andy saw that the seat she had pointed out was right in front of that mean kid with the short hair. What happened to the kid who used to sit here? Andy wondered as he trudged back to the seat. What happened to him?

Miss Kettlewell took roll, and he learned that the name of the kid behind him was Rick Spicer.

The fun started right away. Rick Spicer kept tapping under Andy's seat with his foot. Tap. Tap. All morning long, while Andy copied words off the board. The *At* Family, a sign said. So Miss Kettlewell had written hat, cat, rat, fat.

Andy turned around once to ask the Spicer kid to stop tapping his chair. And just when Miss Kettlewell looked up from her desk.

"Andy Barclay, kindly keep your eyes on your work. We work very hard in this class."

Just my luck, thought Andy. I turn around for *one second* and I get caught. The teacher must have radar.

Then they did some numbers stuff. It was easy for Andy, who knew how to add and subtract. He finished his sheet quickly, and watching what the other kids did, he brought it up to Miss Kettlewell. She took it and put it on a pile to the side. Some of the work seemed like nursery school stuff. Andy wondered if he hadn't been put in a special class for crazy kids.

But some of the kids looked okay. They were dressed nice; they were doing their work.

Spicer started tapping his chair again. Andy heard him snickering behind him, whispering to a friend across the aisle. But Miss Kettlewell saw and heard nothing.

Except if I do anything, Andy knew. I hate this, he thought.

But then—as if it was a miracle—Miss Kettlewell stood up and said, “Children, we’ll go to recess now. And today, since it’s so lovely, you’ll be outside.”

The class said aloud “Yeah.” Miss Kettlewell frowned. “And how do we line up?”

And then, all together, the class grunted, “In alphabetical order.”

Outside! Andy thought. Out of this classroom. That *was* good news. He didn’t even care when Miss Kettlewell snared him by the collar and guided him to his correct alphabetical position, while all the other kids laughed at him.

“Barclay. B,” she said loudly. She pushed him into the line. “Now, remember your position.”

He nodded while the other kids giggled at him.

This is going to be a long day, he thought.

They burst out of the school, all of them, the noisy brats screaming and yelling, laughing as if they didn’t have a care in the world. Except for poor little Andy. Now there is a troubled looking lad, Chucky thought.

But it’s nothing a little soul-swapping won’t cure.

The building had to be empty, he guessed. All the runts were out here, enjoying the sunshine, polluting the air with their screams. The principal’s probably grabbing another cup of java, maybe playing “hide the cruller” with his secretary. The teachers are probably down in their cancer ward, sucking at Marlboros while bragging about which kid is the craziest.

Chucky held the mesh of the fence tightly. I was one of those kids, he thought. In a special class . . . had emotional problems. And reading problems. And math problems. Yeah, I was a regular walking mess, with more problems than you could shake a yardstick at. And all the teachers and the aides and even the principal cared about was collecting their checks and keeping me out of their hair.

School, he thought.

Then he said the word, “School . . .”

It’s a lousy concentration camp for kids. Especially the kids that need help. You don’t get help in school.

He looked at the building.

It’s empty now, he thought.

He let go of the wire mesh fence and started running, dodging between the bushes, checking that no one could see the red-and-blue blur of his Good Guy clothes, hustling to the side door.

I hope it's open, he thought.

He stopped at the entrance gate and, seeing that the kids were over by the hopscotch courts and the climbing toys, he ran.

I move pretty good on these little legs, he thought.

And that scared him. Maybe too good—too good because they're getting to be mine!

He got to the metal door covered with chipped and peeling red paint. He pulled on the handle. And nothing happened. But then he grunted and pulled harder, pressing down hard on the latch. The door popped open.

He smelled something he hadn't smelled in—what?—twenty, twenty-five years? Chalk. And crayons. And stale urine from the lavatories where the little boys with their pee shooters end up playing firemen on the floor. And vomit. He remembered kids throwing up, in the classes, in the halls.

School didn't agree with them.

He hurried up a short flight of stairs. In the corridor he saw a row of doors, and bulletin boards filled with pictures. First grade. Andy's in first grade, he reminded himself.

He hurried down the silent halls, past the water fountain and a glass case with a fire extinguisher. He saw a door just ahead. Principal's Office it said. He heard some clacking from inside. Typing.

He hurried past it, and then past the auditorium. He ran full out.

He saw a door marked 2-A. Second grade, he thought. And then, past that, two more doors, 1-A on his left and 1-B on his right. Which one? he thought.

He heard a door open behind him. Is the principal coming? he wondered. He grabbed the door to 1-A and turned the knob. And—as his luck would have it—it opened.

He slid into the room and the wood floor creaked. He heard the brats outside, squealing and yelling. The room looked like every hell of a classroom he had ever done time in.

Chucky waited, listening to hear if there was anyone there. He could see that there were no feet under the teacher's desk. He ran to the chair and climbed up.

The desk was neat and orderly, with three nice and orderly stacks of papers. Chucky picked up a pile of math papers and flipped through them, searching the tops of the pages, checking the scrawled names.

"Come on," he muttered, "where the hell is it . . . ?"

If Andy's not in this room, he must be in the other one.

He flicked through the Ashleys, and the Merediths, and the

Tommys, and the Brads. Until he came to a paper that had the name Andy B. on top.

This must be the place. He grinned. He reached out and grabbed a pencil. The pencil had words on it: Merry Christmas from Miss Kettlewell.

He heard a whistle blow outside. Recess must be over.

Chucky wrote on the paper, laughing to himself, his strange little voice echoing in the empty room.

Miss Kettlewell held the book up to the class, but from where Andy sat he couldn't see much. He was in his seat, miles away from the front of the room.

My old teacher had a rug, he thought. We all sat around her, real close, and she was good at reading stories. She made voices, and sounds, and . . .

When Miss Kettlewell read, it sounded like his grandmother.

But Andy listened to the story. It was a good story, a story that, for some reason, he really liked.

"And the Cricket said to Pinocchio, 'If you're very, very good, and you promise to tell no lies, then you will become a real, live boy . . .' "

The other kids were whispering, leaning across their seats talking to each other. Miss Kettlewell didn't seem to hear them. Andy leaned forward to hear the story better.

"And Pinocchio said, 'Oh, I will be good, I—' "

Thwack. Andy felt a sudden stinging feeling at his ear. His hand shot up to his right ear and he groaned, "Ow" as he rubbed it.

Rick Spicer was laughing. Andy turned around, scowling. Spicer made a flicking motion with his finger, making his middle finger kick at the air.

"Got you good, kid," Spicer whispered.

"Get lost, Microchip," Andy said.

But as soon as he said it, he realized that he had spoken too loudly. Miss Kettlewell's voice sailed from the front. "Am I boring you, Mr. Barclay?"

Slowly Andy turned to face front. "No, Miss Kettlewell."

She had put the book down and stood up. She started walking toward him, each step releasing more words.

"I have . . . precious little patience . . . for disruptive students."

She stood right in front of his desk. It was Spicer, he wanted to say. "But—," he started.

Miss Kettlewell slammed the Pinocchio book down on the table.

“Especially *new* students whose utmost concern should be fitting into the class. I have my good sides, Andy Barclay.” She paused. He could finish her thought. “And I have my bad sides.”

Andy looked down. He heard a snicker from behind him.

Miss Kettlewell took a breath, a long, slow displeased breath. And then—in the nick of time—the bell rang. And all the kids started scurrying around their desks.

Saved by the bell, Andy thought. He was glad to see this day end.

Miss Kettlewell shook her head and started walking back to the front of the room. “I want those desks spic-and-span before anyone leaves.”

Andy cleared his books and papers off his desk, stuffing them into the empty hole just below the desk top. Then he remembered that he had a Berenstain Bear book from the class library. He pulled it out of his desk and walked over to the bookshelves near the tiny housekeeping corner filled with a battered toy stove, trucks, and blocks.

He didn’t see Miss Kettlewell pop open her mouth. But he did hear her gasp.

He was too busy looking at the shelves of toys. At the Good Guy doll sitting on the bottom shelf.

That hadn’t been there before, he thought. He stood perfectly still, looking at it. It hadn’t been there before. He would have seen it.

He backed away.

“Andy!” Miss Kettlewell screamed. “Andy Barclay, come here!” He spun around. He felt as if he’d fall over, like the time he had a fever and everything seemed to be moving.

Just a doll, he told himself. *Just a doll.*

Right. Just like the other one, his mind yelled. Like the one that tied him up. Like the one that’s going to get him.

“Come here!” Miss Kettlewell repeated. And Andy trudged over to her. He barely saw the other children gathered around the desk, smelling blood, eager to see what the new kid had done to get teacher *sooooo* upset.

The teacher shoved a paper at him.

He saw his name and math problems. And there were words, upside down, words he couldn’t read.

He started to turn the paper around.

“Do you think this is funny? Is this the idea of a joke where you come from?”

He could read the words now.

Fuck you, bitch!

"I . . . I didn't do that . . . ," Andy said quietly.

The kids watching all laughed.

Andy looked at them. He didn't see any sympathetic eyes out there. These were kids who were used to watching someone get in trouble. It was that kind of class.

The bell rang again.

"Go ahead . . . get to your buses," Miss Kettlewell snapped to the class. "And don't forget the spelling test tomorrow." She turned her demon eyes back on Andy while the kids stampeded out the door, to the buses, to home, to freedom.

Andy started to move away.

"Not you. Take your coat off and get comfy, Mr. Barclay. You're going to be here awhile. I'll have the office call your home. You can take the late bus."

Andy sniffed at the air, and his eyes stung. They felt full, and he knew he was ready to start crying.

Not in front of her, he prayed. Not in front of this monster. Teachers like this live for kids crying.

"But I didn't do it!" he wailed. "I swear!"

"No? Then who did?"

Andy shook his head. He thought of Rick Spicer. He might have done it. He was that kind of kid. But when could he have done it? The class had always been together, all the time, and . . .

He turned, looking away from Miss Kettlewell's glares. Over to the windows, the bookshelves, the toys.

The doll.

Miss Kettlewell saw him look. And she started moving, her shoes clicking angrily on the Wood floor. "No, sir, don't even think about playing with toys."

She went straight for the Good Guy doll and picked it up by its red hair. Andy watched. The hair didn't look right. It almost seemed a bit loose.

Miss Kettlewell walked to the back of the room, to a big closet. She unlocked the closet and threw the doll in. Andy caught glimpses of stacks of construction paper, a kick ball, a sweater hanging on a hook. She slammed the closet door shut.

"Now go to your desk and put your head down while I call your . . . your foster mother." Andy went to his desk while Miss Kettlewell slammed the classroom door behind her.

He kept his head down for a minute—knowing that she was

watching him. Then he popped his head up. Just a bit. Just enough to peek.

She locked the door? he wondered. She couldn't have done that, could she? You can't do that to kids. You can't lock them in a room.

Then he turned and looked at the closet door.

That was locked. He was happy about that. She had locked that nice and tight.

He looked at the classroom door again. He didn't see her looking in. He sat up, turning now to look back at the closet door.

It's just another Good Guy doll, he told himself. It's probably been here for ages.

But . . . but then why was the hair the same? The red hair looked all kind of . . . funny.

He checked the classroom door again.

And then, very slowly, as if his moving would make a tremendous sound, he slid off the chair and got to his feet. Tiptoeing, he walked to the back of the room, looking repeatedly over his shoulder.

He moved right to the closet door. Listening.

Hearing nothing.

And then he crouched down and put his eye right up to the keyhole. And looked into the dark closet.

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A glassy blue eye looked right back.

And a voice—from inside the closet—said, “Peek-a-boo!”

Andy screamed. He rolled back on his butt, hitting the wood floor hard. And still he screamed, looking at the keyhole, imagining that he saw a glint of blue in the black spot.

“Help!” Andy yelled. And then louder, screaming. He heard his voice echo off the high ceiling. As he sat there yelling and crying, he looked down at his hands and saw that he was clawing at the wood, as if trying to hold on . . . or crawl away.

He heard the voice again. From inside the closet. Sweet. Helpless.

“Andy, please. Let me out, Andy. Come on, Andy. It’s dark in here. I’m scared of the dark. Please . . . Andy.”

Andy clawed at the wood some more. He looked up at the door of the classroom. It looked so far away, and the closet door seemed so close.

“Hey, Andy, I’m tired of fighting. Let’s make up and be friends again.” He sounded just like the nice Good Guys on the TV show. Nice, and friendly.

“What do you say, Andy, huh?”

Andy tried to scream, but his voice sounded all dry and cracked. “Help me! Someone! Chucky’s here . . . please!”

And he was answered.

From inside the closet.

As Chucky—and he knew it was Chucky—started pounding on the door. Pound. Pound. Pound. His little fists making the door rattle on its hinges. Andy imagined that he could see the wood bulge . . . splinter . . . break.

He got up and ran to the classroom door. He looked over his shoulder at the closet. Chucky kept pounding. He screamed, “Okay, I promise I won’t kill anyone else . . . *promise,* you understand. So okay, now, open the door.”

Andy turned the classroom door knob. But it didn’t move.

“No,” he moaned. And again, “No . . .” He kept twisting the knob, back and forth, but nothing happened. She wouldn’t have locked me in here, he thought. *She wouldn’t have done that.*

“You heard me!” Chucky bellowed. “I *promise* . . . you little shit,

now open the door!”

It wouldn’t open. Andy slowly turned to face the closet door. It was the only thing he saw in the room. There were no toys, no books, no desks, no chalkboard. Just this one door with peeling green paint. And the terrible screaming.

“God damn it! Let me out!”

It wasn’t a Good Guy voice anymore.

Andy watched the door bend each time Chucky beat against it. I could count, Andy thought. Count to ten. And then he’ll stop . . . or the door will just explode open.

He heard the sound of a school bus outside, struggling to move away from the school. Andy looked toward the window. He licked his lips, frozen for a second, but then he dashed over to it. He grabbed the metal handles of the window and tried to push it open. But nothing happened.

“Andy, open it now—or else!”

He looked up. He saw that the window latch was closed. He reached up on his tiptoes, but he was way short of reaching it.

The pounding seemed to be coming faster, like drums, or a train, picking up speed. Andy thought he heard the wood splitting. But he didn’t turn around. Instead, he grabbed one of the kids’ chairs and pulled it close to the window.

There, Andy thought, climbing up but listening carefully to the noise behind him. *That* was definitely wood cracking, breaking.

Please, God, don’t let Chucky out. Please, God, he thought. If you don’t let Chucky out, I’ll be good the rest of my life. I’ll be a good boy and . . .

He tugged at the window latch. It wouldn’t move. More splintering. Then another tug. He grunted and it moved sluggishly.

Just enough, he thought.

He hopped down from the chair and pushed open the window. It was hard getting the window to move even just a little bit. But Andy used his whole body to push upward on it. With the window open, he smelled the air, and a bit of the bus exhaust.

He took a breath and crawled through the open space. He was almost all the way out when something grabbed his foot and held it.

It was only that his shoelaces were caught in the windowsill. He jiggled his foot, the shoe came free, and he slid over the side to safety.

Miss Elizabeth Kettlewell walked down the hall, the clicking of her heels matched by the clucking of her tongue.

Whatever has happened to school? she thought. There was a day when the principal was the final arbiter, a teacher's *best* ally in the battle for the minds of kids. But now it's all so different. This new principal—so incredibly young—just yessed her to death and said, "I'm sure you can handle it, Miss Kettlewell."

And yes I can, she thought. Discipline might be gone from the rest of the world, but not here. Not in my class. She got to her door, turned the knob, and tugged.

Darn, it always sticks. These old doors, this old school. She pulled hard, and the door opened with a loud thwack that reverberated in the empty corridor.

She thought she heard something . . . someone. A pounding. From inside the classroom, she wondered . . . or down the hall?

She looked down the bleak corridor. Only half the lights were on—an energy conservation measure. It made the school hall a gloomy place in the afternoon. Of course she was usually the only one left. The younger teachers wasted no time in getting out, getting home. Such dedication.

But she stayed. Correcting papers. Straightening up her room. Besides, she admitted, there wasn't much for her to go home to.

She walked into her classroom.

"I've called your . . . ," she started to say. But she didn't see Andy Barclay. Then she heard the pounding . . . coming from the closet.

That bad boy, she thought. Those foster kids are always so . . . *bad.*

She started for the door, saying loudly, over the pounding now, "Andy, I told you to stay in your seat. Now, come out of there. Right now!"

She waited for the boy to come out, but he just kept pounding at the door. Miss Kettlewell shook her head and grabbed the doorknob. She twisted it.

But it was locked.

Right, she thought. I locked it.

It didn't occur to her to think how Andy had got in there and locked the door again.

"Andy, open the door!" she ordered.

More pounding, as she dug out her key. She stuck it into the lock.

The pounding stopped, and she unlocked the door and twisted the knob.

The door creaked open, the only sound now that the pounding had ceased.

She had expected to see Andy standing there, right at the door.

Embarrassed that he'd got himself locked in the closet . . . somehow.

But she didn't see anyone. She peered into the gloomy darkness. She smelled the old abandoned sweaters, the rubber kick balls, and the hidden smell of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich left behind weeks, even months ago.

She didn't see Andy.

Her hand was on the doorknob.

"Andy," she said a bit more quietly. "I want you to come out this . . . very second."

Nothing. She took a step into the blackish gloom of the closet. The single light was a few feet away, its string dangling down from the ceiling like a fishing line. She stepped over old, dusty jackets, puzzles, and balls piled on the floor.

"Andy," she said again.

She saw field hockey uniforms and costumes from last year's play hanging to the side. She reached in and pushed them aside, thinking, That would be a good place to hide. And, What a bad boy this new child is. I'm not sure I can spend my last year with such a . . .

She pushed the uniforms quickly aside. They slid noisily to the left and right.

But there was no one there. She breathed again. And then turned.

Something fell from a top shelf.

She yelped, and fell against the wall. A kick ball flew past her and bounced on the floor with a noisy and deep *boing.*

It bounced up to the height of her shoulders, and she reached out and caught it, smiling to herself, thinking that she was far too jittery.

"Andy, where are you? Where . . ."

She turned around and faced a large archery target used by the upper school, which was always storing things in this big closet. The target was red, white, and blue, the colors dull.

Something moved from behind it, something small, popping out from behind the target.

"What?" she mumbled.

It was a small boy, very small, with red hair and—

"Class dismissed!" he yelled.

And he leaped at her.

She backed up. She stumbled on the balls. But even as she reached out to catch herself, to stop her fall, she saw something in the boy's hands. A long cylindrical object with a hose dangling from it, ending in a pin.

The pump. For all the balls, she thought. The air pump.

But this small boy . . .

No, it's not a boy. It's that doll, the one I threw in the closet. A doll . . .

It landed on her and knocked her against the shelves. A row of books and balls tumbled to the ground, and the doll stuck something in her. The needle. The hose. The pump.

She fell to the ground.

This isn't happening, she thought. Dolls don't do this. It's Andy in a mask, a costume. Yes, that's what it is.

The pin punctured the skin, and she felt the wetness of her chest, so wet, so messy.

I'll never get that stain out, she thought. Never.

She grabbed at the air pump but the doll—Andy—held it tight, digging it into her skin, like a dentist way off the mark.

I've had nasty foster children in my class before, but this . . .

He stood on her body. His sneakers did not feel heavy on her pelvis. He wasn't heavy, certainly not as heavy as a boy. It felt more like a . . .

Doll.

"No," she moaned. She watched the doll smile. A horrible smile, worse than any leer she had ever seen before. He started to raise the plunger. Slowly, his grin growing wider.

"No!" she begged.

And up now, all the way to the top. Stopping. The doll flashed teeth. They weren't real teeth. Even in the darkness she could see that. They had to be plastic.

The doll pushed the plunger down fast. And Miss Kettlewell felt her wound puff up and explode, the air stretching her skin, pulling it.

She screamed. She raised her fists against the doll, missing, hitting the wood floor. She heard the doll laughing, cackling. It snapped the pin out of her wound, and the hose whipped into the air sending a spray of blood onto her face, onto her dry lips.

She grunted, and with a tremendous effort, she pushed her body off the pile of balls and books.

The doll flew backward, rolling toward the target.

She tried to stand. But that was impossible. There's no way I can stand, she knew. No way at all. But I can crawl. Yes, she thought, starting to move over the clutter. I can crawl. And beg . . .

"Please . . . ," she moaned, always moving. Arm. Knee. Arm. Knee. "Somebody . . . help me . . ."

She was out of the closet, and she saw the open door. She picked up

speed.

If I get there, I'll be safe, she told herself. Just a few more feet now, a few more . . .

She felt her knees sliding on slimy wet patches, sliding on the blood dripping from her wound.

The custodians don't like messes, she thought. And this will be such a very big mess.

Almost there. She could see the corridor—she saw a bright red exit sign. Someone would hear her. She'd scream so loud that someone in the office would have to . . .

Hear her!

She reached the door.

From the corner of her eye she saw a small red sneaker. She watched it kick the door away from her hands.

When she looked up he was standing there, his back to the door, facing her.

"No!" she moaned, and she spun around and started back.

The window, I saw an open window. I can get out. Call for help.

She wet herself like a madwoman.

When she turned back to see where the doll was, she saw him run and then slide on the waxy floor—right beside her.

"Wheee," he said.

But she kept on going, through the path between the students' desks, until she saw the window. Oh, yes, someone will hear, she knew.

She reached the wall, and her hands clawed upward, up to the windowsill.

I'll pull myself up, she told herself. And . . .

She saw a reflection in the glass of the window. A yardstick. And not just any old yardstick. One of those special yardsticks. With his picture on it. The doll's face—dozens of them.

It slapped down on her hands just as she pulled at the windowsill.

"Oh," she moaned. And then again, harder, smacking her knuckles.

"You've been very naughty, Miss Kettlewell. Very . . ."

Whack. The yardstick smacked her knuckles. Looking up, she saw tiny red trails run down her wrist, her arm.

"Naughty."

And again the doll smashed her. And again, and again, until her hands let go.

No one will hear me now, she knew. *No one.*

He stopped thwacking her hands and started beating her stomach with the stick, and her wounds, then up to her head.

“You’ve been very naughty,” the doll shrieked, “and you have . . .” Thwack. “. . . to be taught . . .” Thwack. “. . . a lesson.”

She brought her arms up, slowly, to keep the blows from her face, her eyes. But he kicked her arms away as the yardstick kept going up and down, up and down, smacking at her head, her stomach.

After each terrible whack, she screamed. Until she couldn’t scream anymore. And she could only lie there. Her mouth full. Bloody and full.

Her arms lay flat on the ground, useless, and she let this thing, this doll, finish what he was having so much fun doing.

19

Joanne watched Phil walk up to the house as she chewed at her lower lip, imagining how he would react when she told him the latest news. The latest incident involving Andy.

He opened the front door and came into the house, a broad smile on his face.

Which melted as soon as he looked at Joanne.

Slowly, he put down his attaché case and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Andy,” she sighed. “He’s locked himself in the bathroom.”

“Damn.” Phil shook his head disapprovingly. “I told you this just wasn’t going to work. That boy has too many problems.”

Phil turned and started quickly up the stairs, his face determined.

Joanne followed but even before she got to the top of the stairs, she heard Phil’s heavy knocks and his voice, low, serious. It was Phil’s no-nonsense voice.

“Andy? Andy!” There was no answer. “Andy, what’s the trouble?”

Then—after a long pause—she heard Andy answer. “I’m *not* coming out.”

Phil sighed and turned back to Joanne. He looked about as fed up as she’d ever seen him. He looked as if he was about to say something to her, but instead he turned back to the door.

“Andy, remember what I told you about locking doors. We don’t lock doors in this house, son. Now come on out.” Phil paused, waited. Then he added, “No one’s going to hurt you.”

Phil waited. Joanne heard a sound from behind her. She turned and saw Kyle, standing well away, watching the scene.

Phil banged on the door again, violently, scaring Joanne. And, she thought, it has to be scaring Andy.

“Andy, you get out here right now!”

He’s going to bust it down, she thought. He can do it. Phil’s big enough, strong enough, to bust the door right down.

But then she heard a tiny click. The door squeaked open. She saw Andy’s eyes, so dark and beautiful, looking out through the crack.

And—so slowly—he opened the door the rest of the way and, looking left and right, came out.

He looked up at Phil.

“What’s this all about?” Phil said.

“Chucky—he followed me to school.”

At the word Chucky, Joanne saw Phil shake his head and push his hair off his forehead. He’s had more than enough of this, she knew. And—maybe—so have I.

“He followed me, and he tried to get me again. So I ran home.”

Phil turned and fixed Joanne with a disgusted look. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

Joanne nodded. He’s going to love this, she thought. Just love it.

“His teacher called—Miss Kettlewell—and she said . . .” She felt Andy watching her. “. . . Said that she was keeping Andy after school for detention. She said Andy wrote an obscenity on his math paper.”

Andy exploded. “Chucky did it!” he screamed. And again, “Chucky did it!”

“Oh, Christ,” Phil muttered. He reached out and put a hand on Andy’s shoulder. Andy was crying, looking at both of them.

Looking for one of us to believe him, Joanne knew. But that was impossible.

“I’m telling the truth!” he said.

Joanne nodded and tried to smile.

“This way, Andy,” Phil said, and he guided Andy down the hall, to the stairs.

“Go ahead, Andy. Open the door.”

Phil had marched Andy right in front of the cellar door.

“Phil, maybe it’s not such a good idea.”

Phil waved Joanne away. His hands kept Andy locked in position, facing the door. Joanne felt the boy’s horror, his terror at the idea of opening it. “Phil,” she started to say again.

“Please, Joanne,” he snapped. Then back to Andy, whispering in his ear, “Go ahead, son. Open it.”

She watched Andy’s hand slowly rise to the doorknob.

“That’s it,” Phil ordered. “Open it.”

Andy reached out and grabbed hold of the doorknob. He gave it a furious twist.

The door opened with a creak that made Joanne’s skin crawl. She saw Andy step back. She came closer, to look over his shoulder. Down to the cellar.

She saw the wooden steps, barely visible in the spill of light from the kitchen. And she saw thin gossamer strands of cobwebs. And

there, at the bottom of the stairs, sitting on the floor as if it was waiting for them . . .

Was the doll.

Andy turned away, but Phil grabbed him and made the boy look back. “No, go ahead, Andy. Look down there. And tell me what you see.”

Andy looked back, shaking his head. “It’s Chucky. But . . .”

Joanne saw Phil squeeze Andy’s shoulders. “His name is Tommy. I bought him last year. And he’s been down there since last night. Hasn’t he?”

Andy tried to shake free. He shook his head and he started crying again.

“Phil, I don’t think . . .”

“Hasn’t he?”

Joanne touched Andy’s shoulder. She stared down at the cellar, at the desolate cellar.

Andy kept shaking his head back and forth.

Joanne sat on their bed and watched Phil pace.

He was determined, she knew. And there was probably nothing she could say to stop him. Not this time.

“We’re not keeping him,” he repeated. “His problems are way out of our league.” He looked right at her, his eyes glowing. *“Way out.”*

“Phil, you’re overreacting. He’s just . . .”

“Overreacting? Yesterday, maybe. But after today? I’m just exercising common sense.” He stepped closer to her, lowering his voice. “That boy has major problems, Joyce. Serious problems. I want him out of here.”

She looked at their shut door. Phil was talking loud. She imagined how Andy would feel if he heard this. “Keep your voice down,” she said. “He’ll hear you!”

But her warning to her husband only seemed to make him angrier. “He needs professional help. Not this, not a normal home. We’re no good for him.”

Now Joanne raised her voice. “Oh, stop pretending that you’re worried about him.” She stood up. “Stop pretending that you give a damn about the boy.” She stepped up to him. “You never wanted him here in the first place! This is just a convenient excuse for you.”

“That’s not true!”

She looked at her husband. He was about as determined as she had ever seen him. He usually rolled with the punches, indulged her,

letting her bring these kids into their home. Anything if it made her happy.

And now—damn!—he was probably right. But then why am I fighting so hard for the boy? she wondered.

Now what is the answer to that?

Andy heard them yelling, fighting about him, through the walls. He opened his door and heard even more. He shuffled back to the toy chest, to the trucks he had arranged in a line, ready for a race.

He didn't hear all the words. Just enough to know they were fighting about him.

Andy remembered something from a long, long time ago, something that was just like this. People yelling and fighting. There was crying . . . and yelling. But that's all he could remember.

They don't believe me, he told himself. And they're going to send me back to the center.

Maybe I'll be safer in the center.

Maybe it will be harder for Chucky to get me.

The boy pulled one of the trucks out of the line, the big Hess oil tanker.

No. It's not hard for Chucky to get anywhere. He must be magic. He can appear and disappear.

Magic.

He pulled another truck alongside the tanker.

Maybe . . . maybe I won't even get back to the center. Maybe tonight . . .

Someone was watching him, and he quickly looked up.

It was Kyle, standing in the doorway looking at him. Her face was sad. She heard them too, Andy thought, heard them yelling, fighting about me.

Kyle stepped into his room and closed the door.

"They're going to send me away," he told her. He made the dump truck crash into the tanker, knocking it over.

Kyle walked over to him and sat down on the floor next to him. "It's not the end of the world, Andy. You'll be okay."

Why is she being so nice to me? he wondered. Why is she . . .

He turned to her and he—no!—was crying again. I'm crying all the time, and my mom is never here. To hug me close and tight, so I can smell her clothes and feel her warmth. And hear her voice whispering that everything is going to be okay. That everything is going to be just fine.

“Wh-where will I go?” he cried.

He looked at Kyle. And he knew why she was sitting next to him. It’s happened to her. We’re the same. I’m just like her. ’Cause I don’t have a mom now.

No. I do have a mom.

“Where will they send me?” he repeated.

Kyle reached out and brushed his hair, and then she hopped closer to him. She gave him a squeeze. And it felt good.

“I’ve lived with dozens of different families. Dozens! I always seem to be sent away just when I start feeling comfortable.” She smiled at him. “But then, I’m not so great at taking orders.”

He smiled back, and she rewarded him with another squeeze.

“But you know what?” she went on. “Every time it happens—every single time—it makes me stronger.” Her eyes seemed to glow. “It makes me stronger because it reminds me that the only one I can count on is myself. Just me. Do you understand?”

He nodded, even though he wasn’t sure he did understand.

“You have to count on yourself, Andy. That’s all you’ll ever really have.” She leaned close and, with her hand, wiped away some of his tears. “And you have to learn that now, Andy.”

He nodded.

“I know it sounds rough,” she said. “Hey, it is rough. But believe me . . . you’ll get used to it.”

He nodded again, but he thought, No, I’ll never get used to it. Never.

Kyle started to get up, but Andy reached out and grabbed her hand. He held it tight.

“But it doesn’t matter, Kyle.”

She looked confused.

And he spoke softly. “Nothing matters, because wherever I go, Chucky will find me.”

Kyle shook her head and pulled him close. He hugged her back as hard as he could.

He lay awake in his bed, listening to the sounds in the house as everyone went to sleep.

Andy knew he wouldn’t fall asleep.

Kyle was right, he thought. You have to rely on yourself. That’s all there is. There’s no one else. I have to learn that, he thought.

He heard sounds from down the hall—Phil and Joanne going to the bathroom, then their bedroom TV. Music. People laughing. Still Andy

lay in his bed, staring at the white ceiling.

Thinking, I wish I didn't have to do this. Thinking, Maybe . . . I can't do this. But knowing, now, that he had to do this.

Then the TV went silent, but Kyle was still up. He heard her padding around her room. Her radio went on for a few minutes and then off again.

And he thought how much he liked her. How much he needed her. She's the only one who tried to help me, he thought. And that's because she's just like me.

Then it was quiet.

He heard a car roar down the street, a loud car, the type a teenager would run around in. He imagined it to be a black car, with its rear end tilted way up in the air. Maybe loud music blasting away inside.

He heard the wind rustle the trees outside.

The wind was spooky. He never heard that where he lived with his mom. There weren't any trees there.

They whistled all spookylike, as if they were from some movie his mom wouldn't ever let him see.

It was time, he knew.

I'll get out of bed by the time I count to ten, he told himself.

He counted to ten. Slowly.

And then thought, I'll count to twenty and *then* get out of bed.

He stopped on nineteen.

And waited. Then he spoke, slowly, to the walls in his room, to the whistling wind. "Twenty," he whispered. He slid out of the warm bed and immediately felt the cold, around his ankles, and then on his arms.

He stood beside his bed and waited. He almost hoped someone would come and say, "Andy, whatever are you doing? Now get back into bed this minute." And they'd tuck him in so hard he wouldn't be able to move.

Until morning.

But he kept thinking of Kyle hugging him and saying, *You have to count on yourself.*

He started walking. Taking care not to land too heavily, so the floor wouldn't creak. He walked out of his room and turned left. There was no light coming from Kyle's room. Good. She's asleep. Everyone's asleep.

Except me.

Me and . . .

He walked down the stairs, the black stairs, holding onto the

bannister as tightly as he could. It felt slippery in his hand. One step creaked, and he froze, turning around to see if anyone was waiting—just behind him!—ready to run down and stop him.

But there was no one. He felt disappointment.

He kept on going down. Until he got to the foyer and turned right, into the kitchen, to the cellar door.

His feet hit the cold linoleum. The floor felt icy. Through the kitchen windows he saw the tree branches moving, rustling together. Like the trees from *The Wizard of Oz,* the trees that throw apples at Dorothy and the Scarecrow.

He looked at the cellar door, shut tight.

He turned away and walked over to the drawers filled with the forks and spoons and . . .

Other things.

He opened a drawer and found lots of knives. Most of them looked dull, like the kind used to slice butter. Then he found a long knife with a wavy edge. He touched that—just barely—and felt how sharp it was. But the long knife felt flimsy, as if it would break.

I need something strong, he told himself. Something that won't break—no matter how many times I have to use it.

The wind whistled at him from outside.

He looked up at the window and then down, just below it. He saw a knife sitting in some kind of rack.

He reached out and touched the knife's big handle.

It's an electric knife, Andy thought. I've never seen anything like that before. An electric knife. He fit his hand into the loop of the handle and pulled the knife up.

It was heavy, but not too heavy. And his thumb seemed to fit right on top of a button. He pressed down on the button.

The machine came to life. The handle vibrated. The blade sliced back and forth in the darkness, so fast Andy couldn't even see it move. He quickly took his finger off the button. Before they hear, he thought. He lowered the blade, pointing it down.

This is how we walk with sharp things, his mother always told him. Make the point face down, right by your side. That's the safe way.

He took a breath . . . and walked to the cellar door.

20

Chucky wasn't there.

Not that Andy had really expected him to be, just sitting on the floor pretending he hadn't moved, pretending he had just landed there.

But Andy sure wished he was.

There was a thumping sound—Andy had heard it before. It's the dryer, he knew. Joanne had put something in the dryer before she went to sleep, some of his clothes maybe, and they were tossing around in there.

And there was the knife. Point down. Whirring in his hand.

He reached behind him and dragged a kitchen chair close to the cellar door. But he kept looking down in the cellar. It would be a mistake not to keep looking at the cellar. He knew that.

The chair got stuck on a metal strip that crossed the floor. Andy had to grunt and tug it over the strip.

He pulled the chair close to his body. Then he risked a quick look up at the string.

The light string dangled overhead.

He turned back to look at the cellar.

He didn't see anything. He just heard the dryer.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

He stepped, backward, onto the chair. And when he was up, he reached overhead, his hand swinging back and forth, trying to find the string. And all the time looking down the stairs, always checking the stairs. I can't forget that, he thought.

But then he had to look up. To see the string.

And when he did, he saw that he couldn't reach it without going on his tiptoes. He took a breath and stood up.

Just a bit more, he thought, stretching as much as he could. He tried to look down the stairs.

The chair seemed to tip. Just a bit, back toward the kitchen. He made a small yelping sound. And his hands flew out so he could get his balance. The electric blade flew up, near his face, and then out, steadying him.

The chair was steady.

Again, he checked the stairs. His eyes looking all the way into the

gloomy black. I'll see you, he thought. I'll see you if you try to come up and surprise me.

He looked at the string one last time. There's no way I'll reach it—even on my tiptoes, he thought.

He stepped down from the chair, carefully, the blade no longer pointing down. Andy held it in front of him.

He walked to the first step leading down and stood there.

He said, slowly, "Come out, Chucky." He listened. The dryer made whomping noises. The blade whirred. Is it weaker, Andy thought. The electric knife didn't sound as loud. Was it moving fast enough?

"Come out, Chucky," he said again. "It's time to play."

He started down the stairs. One after the other. The handrail was slivering. It wobbled in his hand. He held the knife even higher, as if it could keep the darkness away. "Chucky," he said.

Another step, and he kept on going as he left the light of the kitchen behind. He could see shapes down here now. A big trunk. Boxes stacked twice as tall as he was. Now—just above the dryer—he heard wind again. It whistled differently down here.

He reached the bottom, and a light shone in a window. It moved through the cellar, causing shadows to run across the room. He saw the dryer. White and friendly. There was a bird just to his right, a big bird that didn't move.

It's just a stuffed bird, he told himself. A dead, stuffed bird. He moved past it. The cellar was dark.

Chucky could be anywhere down here, he thought. Inside the trunk, behind the boxes. Anywhere.

He thought of the kitchen behind him. Maybe I should run away. Hide upstairs. So that he can't get me.

But then he thought of Kyle. I have to do it myself, he thought.

He moved the blade back and forth. He whispered the name: "Chucky . . ."

He heard something. His steps! Yes, that sound had to be Chucky's steps, running from there . . . to there. Or was he moving closer, hiding, ready to jump out?

He turned a bit. He saw a tricycle—upside down. And its pedals were slowly turning.

He's just been here.

Then more light filled the cellar. Andy looked up at the window. Up at the hole. Just big enough. Just big enough for Chucky.

So that's how he did it.

And then he saw a shape, a small person . . . a shadow moving

against the wall. Hiding behind the boxes.

He started walking toward them. The blade sounded even weaker. Maybe I should turn it off and save the battery, Andy wondered. But no, Chucky would like me to do that. He's waiting for *that.*

Andy got to the corner of the pile of boxes. The shadow had gone behind the boxes. He stuck the knife out—and kept moving.

Then he saw what the shadow was.

It was a statue. Of someone in a cap . . . holding a lantern. A statue. It didn't move. It was just the shadows.

Thump! He heard a noise behind him and he turned around. It smells bad down here, Andy thought. All wet and ugly.

He could see the light from the stairs, from the kitchen. It looked so far away.

He heard the thump again, and he could tell that it came from the dryer. He walked over to it. He stood, looking at the machine, wondering if Chucky was behind it, thinking, Maybe he left. Through the hole. Maybe he isn't here anymore.

The wind blew again and he heard a click. He turned and something landed at his feet.

It was a clothespin. There was a clothesline just to the right. And something moved, with the wind from the hole. It fluttered.

A loud buzz suddenly filled the cellar. Like an alarm.

He turned back to the dryer. It was buzzing. Because it was done.

Andy looked at the dryer.

Could it be? he wondered. He held the knife tight.

He reached out and opened the door. The buzzing stopped. He saw the dark jumble of clothes inside. He smelled them—so clean. They didn't belong down here.

He looked for something hidden in the clothes. He stuck the blade into them.

If you're in here, Chucky, I'm going to get you. He dug through the pile and then jabbed at it, again and again. 'Cause Chucky is fast. He can move quickly and—

Something rustled behind him, almost in his ear.

He spun around, chewing at his lip now.

I've got to be brave. I can't cry out. I have to do this.

Or he'll get my soul.

A nightgown flapped in the wind.

And—thinking that Chucky might be hiding behind it—Andy jabbed at it with the knife. Then he sliced at it. The blade was getting weaker. But the nightgown fell into big pieces, then shreds, like the long strips

of construction paper at school.

They fell to the ground.

Chucky wasn't behind the nightgown. Chucky wasn't here.

He's gone, Andy knew. And then . . .

There was a yell. That voice again! That sick Good Guy voice! Chucky landed on Andy's back. Andy grunted as he was knocked to the ground. He tried to hold onto the knife. I've got to hold onto the knife . . . please . . . , he begged.

But as soon as he hit the hard floor, the knife fell out of his hand and slid away. Still whirring.

Chucky had him around the neck. Andy felt the small doll arm closing tightly around his neck. He tried to gulp at some air, but none would come in.

Andy tried reaching behind him, to grab Chucky's body and throw him off.

But Chucky tightened his hold.

Please . . . , Andy thought, . . . please don't let him do this to me. He begged a God he wasn't sure was there.

Please.

Chucky leaned forward, and Andy felt the plastic lips, and then the teeth, moving against his neck. He heard the whirring of the electric blade. He looked up.

His arms were out in front of him, he saw. If I can move just a bit, I might be able to grab the knife.

Andy wriggled forward. The blade was just there.

But then Chucky's hand covered his, reaching out for the blade, stretching. Andy saw red spots in the dark cellar.

He's going to reach it, Andy thought.

He'll take my soul.

And then he'll kill me.

21

Andy watched Chucky stretch out, just a bit more, trying to beat Andy's hand to the knife. The doll's weight suddenly shifted off him, and Andy rolled to the side, sending Chucky flying off.

As fast as he could, Andy turned around on his belly and crawled to the whirring knife.

He grabbed it.

"Got it!" he said.

But Chucky wrapped himself around Andy's ankles and started yanking him backward.

"Why fight it, Andy? You and me were meant for each other, kiddo. We're going to be *very* close." He gave Andy a tug that made the boy's cheek scrape the gritty ground. "In fact, we're going to be inseparable."

Andy grunted and twisted as he was hauled back toward Chucky. He yelled, screamed at Chucky, trying to kick his legs free. He jabbed at Chucky with the knife. But Chucky dodged the blade. Andy felt it hit something, a bit of cloth around the doll's sleeve, but right after the slice, Chucky's hand shot out—so fast!

He grabbed the blade, and as if taking the toy from him, Chucky yanked the knife away from Andy. "Thanks, pal. This is going to come in handy!"

Andy screamed. In the darkness of the cellar, Andy could see only a slight glow, a bit of reflection from Chucky's grinning cheeks.

Chucky laughed and then raised the knife over Andy, muttering something.

I can't move, Andy thought. He tried wriggling left and right, but he couldn't move at all.

Chucky kept muttering. Strange words, words that scared Andy.

Then a light came on . . .

The light from the top of the stairs.

Chucky froze. The glow was behind him. And some of the light shone on his hair, bright red.

"Shit," he hissed.

"Andy!"

It was Phil!

"Andy, what the *hell* is going on down there?"

Chucky let the knife fall to the ground, right next to Andy's head, and then he jumped off him.

He's going to get Phil, Andy thought. *He's going to get Phil.*

Andy sat up and heard the stairs creak.

No, he wanted to say. But he was breathing too hard, just trying to get air.

Another step, another creak. And then, finally, "Chucky's here!" Andy yelled. "Don't come down!"

Another step, another creak. Andy saw Phil's legs, an then the man's hand holding onto the railing. "What the—Andy, get up here. Now. Don't make me come down and get you."

Andy ran to the stairs. I can get up, he thought. With Phil. I'll get up, and get away with Phil. We'll lock the door and . . .

As he got near the bottom of the stairs he saw Chucky. Just below the stairs. Moving around, hiding something.

A broom. Chucky was doing something to the end of the broom, breaking something off.

"No!" Andy yelled.

"Andy! What the hell are you doing? Get up here."

Phil took another step down. And then, in the cracks of light falling through the steps, Chucky was there, holding the broom. It had no bristles. It just had a jagged edge. Like a spear, Andy thought. It's just like a spear.

Phil took another step. "Young man, now you are really going to get it."

Chucky jabbed up with the broom while Andy watched.

"No!" Andy screamed.

"What the . . . ," Phil started to say.

The broom shot up, between the steps, right between Phil's legs. Phil screamed.

Chucky laughed. "Good shot, huh, sport?"

Phil collapsed. He fell, like a balloon losing air. He just tumbled forward and to the side, grabbing at the railing. Andy saw his head hit a step. He heard a loud crack.

"Great shot!" Chucky screamed.

Phil then fell off to the side, down toward the cement floor. Andy backed up. One of Phil's feet was caught between the steps, and he hung from the side, upside down.

Chucky's going to get him, Andy thought. Chucky will get him unless I do something.

Chucky stepped out into the light, right in front of Phil. Andy

turned and looked at the blade, whirring away, even quieter now.

Chucky stepped right up to Phil's upside-down face. A line of blood traveled down Phil's leg, onto his chest, down his neck, across his face, his lips.

"How's it hanging, Phil?" Chucky said.

Andy looked at the knife.

Phil started to say something.

He believes me now, Andy thought.

Phil's foot came loose, and he fell—head-first—to the ground.

"Phil . . . Andy . . . ?" Andy looked up to the top of the stairs. He saw Joanne and then Kyle hurrying down.

Chucky looked at Andy. He grinned and then darted into the shadows of the basement.

Joanne hurried down and saw Phil.

"God, no!" she said. "Oh, sweet Jesus, no." She stopped, while Kyle grabbed her.

Then Joanne pulled away and ran to Phil. Andy backed off. Kyle looked at him, then back to Joanne.

"Don't touch him!" Kyle said. "I'll call an ambulance."

Andy stood there. They think I did it, he realized. They think I did that to Phil. And Chucky could leap out at them right now, because they're not looking for him.

"Oh, God, Phil," Joanne said. Andy stepped closer. I have to tell her, he thought. I have to tell her what happened. "Phil, honey."

Andy saw Phil open his mouth. A red glob was there. He said something. The glob bubbled. The red goo got all foamy. His eyes were open.

And then they closed.

"Get away!" Joanne yelled, seeing Andy next to her. "Get away from me!"

Andy looked in the shadows, near the piles of boxes filled with old clothes. Looking for Chucky.

But there was no Chucky there.

Just Joanne holding Phil's lifeless head, crying . . . and then the sirens, the terrible sirens that had always seemed to hurry past his apartment, never stopping.

Until that day Aunt Maggie went out the window.

And now . . .

And now the sirens are here.

Too late again.

* * *

Kyle stepped out of Joanne's way.

Joanne roughly pulled open the bottom drawer of Andy's dresser. She scooped out the clothes and stuffed them into the boy's suitcase.

She kept crying the entire time, wiping at her eyes, her cheeks.

"Joanne," Kyle tried to say. And she thought, I'm not so good at this comforting business. Still she felt that she had to try.

Kyle reached out to touch Joanne's arm. But Joanne shrugged away, and then she grabbed the suitcase's zipper and yanked it shut. It caught, jamming halfway closed. She cursed and then pulled harder, but it wouldn't move.

"Joanne," Kyle said.

It was scary watching the woman like this. Filled with grief. But Kyle knew she was also filled with hate for Andy.

Joanne stopped, rubbing at her red eyes with two hands. "I . . . I should have listened to Phil. He *knew* there was something very wrong with that boy." Joanne looked right at Kyle. "He'd be alive now if I had listened to him."

It felt awkward . . . but Kyle put her arm around the woman, and then Joanne just sobbed against her. Kyle tried her best to comfort her. "Shhh. It isn't your fault."

Joanne kept heaving. Kyle stroked her hair, feeling very weird. I'm not the comforting type, she thought. But who else was there? They had carted Phil off in a body bag. And now Andy was downstairs . . . waiting . . .

Kyle went to the suitcase. She grabbed the zipper. "I'll take care of this," she said.

She finally worked the zipper closed and then picked up the bag. She patted Joanne's shoulder and walked out of the room. I doubt she'll be getting many more little boys for a while, Kyle guessed.

Joanne followed Kyle out of the room and down the stairs. When they got to the foyer, Andy was standing there beside Grace Poole of the Children's Crisis Center.

He's shaking, Kyle saw. Standing there, shivering. The crazy little kid is scared out of his mind. She plopped the suitcase down.

Grace Poole nodded to Kyle and then turned—a bit uneasily, Kyle thought—to Andy. "Andy, you'll be fine. You'll spend a few days with us at the center, just until we find you another family."

I can't imagine there will be a long line for that offer, Kyle thought. This kid's got one bad track record. And whatever you do, don't let him see one of those dolls.

Grace Poole looked back to Kyle. “We’ve placed Kyle with a number of families. And things always seem to work out, don’t they, Kyle?”

She saw Andy look up at her. The kid looked like a mess. Despite everything, she felt sorry for him. There’s got to be some pretty strange stuff going on in his head, she thought.

Kyle picked up the suitcase. “Sure.” She handed the suitcase to Andy. “Here’s your stuff.”

Andy’s hand, shaking, reached out for the suitcase. He kept looking at her. Waiting for me to say something, she thought. Nice knowing you. Keep your chin up. Watch out for Chucky. Jee-zus!

“Come on, Andy,” Grace said. “We have to go.”

She gave Kyle one more smile and then led Andy out the front door.

The police car was waiting for them. What a way to get escorted back to the children’s center. Officer Ginko and his man-eating shepherd were on escort duty.

Just in case the kid goes *boingo* again.

Kyle saw two more police cars in the driveway. Indecipherable electronic chatter could be heard through their open windows.

Grace and Andy walked to the car, and the boy turned around and looked at Kyle. She made herself smile.

Good luck, kid, she thought.

Grace gently guided him into the car.

* * *

Kyle went down to the cellar. It was all lit up now, and the cops were walking back and forth, moving boxes, taking measurements, muttering to each other.

It was still creepy down here, Kyle thought, but better than going back upstairs and facing Joanne again.

One of the cops—young, kind of good-looking—turned to her. “We’ll be out of your way in a minute here.” He had a big leather notebook open. “Did anyone else see the accident? Anyone besides the boy?”

Accident? Well, that’s one way to describe it, guessed Kyle. She shook her head. “No, No one.”

She was facing the stairs. And underneath the stairs, where it was still dark, she saw something.

Near the back wall. Just sticking out a bit into the light.

A pair of red sneakers.

The goddamn doll, she thought. She took a breath. And then she repeated, “No, no one but Andy.”

The cop nodded. “Okay.” He looked up at her and gave her a consoling smile. “We’re all done then.” He turned to the other cop. “Let’s go.”

The other cop shut off their big light, and the cellar returned to its normal murky gloom.

Kyle started to lead them up the stairs to the kitchen. But she stopped. She ran underneath the stairs and grabbed the doll.

We’ve had enough of *this* in the house, she thought.

And she dragged it upstairs.

22

She walked out the side door. The cops were getting into their cars while half the neighbors stood outside watching the show, probably busting their guts to know what was going on.

Kyle shook her head and walked to the metal trash can.

The wind blew, sending her hair flying backward. The air smelled good after the dankness of the cellar. She picked up the trash can lid and threw the doll into the can. Then she slammed the lid down flush.

The cops got into their patrol cars, probably dreaming of coffee and free doughnuts.

Kyle reached into her back pocket and took out a pack of Marlboros. She dug out a slightly bent cigarette and stuck it in her mouth. The cars pulled away. She lit her cigarette.

She thought, I'll kind of miss Phil getting on my case about smoking. At least he cared enough to say something.

She sucked in the smoke and walked over to the swing. The neighbors were still watching, still chattering to themselves. Of course, they'll read all about it in the local paper, Kyle thought: "Man has bad fall in basement."

She sat down on the swing. Her feet dragged against the ground. I'm too big for swings, she thought. Still she pushed against the ground and swung back and forth, just a bit, while she smoked . . . and thought.

The swing creaked as she moved.

But she still heard a sound from the house. She turned around. It came from Joanne's bedroom. A whirring noise. Then she saw Joanne at the window, at her sewing machine.

God . . . Well, guess she's got to do something. Kyle looked away. Guess you've got to do something. She gave a push with her foot.

And she felt something on the ground. *Something hard.*

She stopped and leaned forward to look down at the ground.

It was a red sneaker. A small red sneaker.

She leaned down some more, still on the seat but close enough so that she could touch the sneaker, pull at it. Her fingers closed around the tip of it. She tugged at it.

But it didn't budge. It was connected to something buried in the ground, something that held it. She came off her seat and crouched on

the ground. She grabbed the shoe with her two hands and pulled, grunting.

Until it popped out. Flew out of the ground.

She recognized the body, even covered with dirt. It was another one of those Good Guy dolls. But this one, this one . . .

Its head was all smashed in. And inside the skull she saw the dirt moving, then glistening bodies, writhing inside, disturbed.

She screamed and let the Good Guy doll fall to the ground.

She stood up, rubbing her hands on her jeans. What's going on here, she thought. What in the world is going—

She turned slowly.

Very slowly.

To look at the trash can. The lid was still on.

But it was slightly ajar.

She got up and walked to it, ever so slowly. Telling herself, No. This isn't happening. I'm just getting freaked out. It's been a bad night and I . . .

She reached the can. She grabbed the lid. She lifted it. And the trash can was empty.

She moaned.

And then—over the wind and the rustle of the branches—Kyle heard a loud thwap, and then again.

Thwap.

The screen door to the kitchen slapped against its frame, as if the breeze was rattling it. Or . . .

She looked up at Joanne, sitting at the window. Sewing. Rocking back and forth, working on her grief.

Kyle felt cold. I should just get out of here, she thought. This isn't my problem. I'm just passing through, that's all. She saw Joanne by the window, still rocking.

Kyle yelled up to her, "Joanne . . . ," then louder, "Joanne!"

When she realized that Joanne couldn't hear her, Kyle knew that she would have to go inside the house.

Through the back door. Thinking, I don't want to do this. It's not my damn problem.

The kitchen was quiet. She heard Joanne at the sewing machine. She's okay, thought Kyle. Everything's fine. Chucky—I can't believe I'm thinking about him as if he were real.

It's because he *is* real, she told herself. *As real as you and I.*

And that means Andy isn't crazy.

Out of the kitchen now, and down the hall. It was dark. Did Joanne shut all the lights off? The only light came from upstairs.

She was going to call Joanne's name again. Except the sound of it, here, would be too terrifying. And worse. If he was in here, if the little bastard was in the house, he'd know she was here too.

Kyle wasn't ready for that. She stopped by the hall closet. She opened it, always keeping her eyes looking forward, into the darkness of the foyer and the living room. The door opened.

For a minute she held her breath. He could be in here, she thought.

But it was still, quiet. She reached up, pushing aside an old tackle box and then digging under a backpack. She dug to the very corner of the closet shelf. Where she found her knife.

She pulled it down and pressed the latch. The blade slid open—almost too noisily. It gleamed, catching whatever light there was in the hall.

She had taken that knife everywhere.

Some of her foster parents had not been too nice. Some of the dads didn't just want to play softball.

The knife made her feel better.

Now she started walking again. She held the knife in front of her, a beacon. She turned and went up the stairs. The sewing machine whirred on, clearer, constant.

And she thought, There's something odd about that.

The knife went up the steps first, leading her.

Halfway up, some light from Joanne's room spilled onto the blue carpet. He's not here, Kyle told herself. The doll—Chucky—has left.

Probably gone for Andy.

We'll have to get help, get someone to go the center and—

Something rolled toward her. Ta-dump, ta-dump, down the stairs. Small, round.

It hit her feet. A spool of thread. That's strange, she thought. A spool of thread.

She kept moving up the stairs, past her room, past Andy's old room, right to Joanne's room.

"Joanne," she said.

Kyle saw her, hunched over her machine, rocking back and forth with the pedal, back and forth, sewing, sewing.

Kyle took a step into the room. Something scratched at the window. A branch from a big sycamore, the one with the swing.

"Joanne!" she said again.

Kyle wondered why she wouldn't talk. Is she *that* destroyed? Was she made that crazy by the death? She's lost it—in which case she's not going to be able to deal with the idea of Chucky too well.

And they'll never believe me, thought Kyle. They'll think I'm nuts, just like Andy.

"Joanne," she said again. Kyle was close enough to touch the woman's shoulder. Tap her to make her stop all that damned sewing.

Kyle looked down. She wasn't sewing anything.

"Jo—"

She tapped her again. Harder this time. And Joanne's foot slipped off the pedal. Kyle saw that Joanne's hand was—what*?—tied* to the wheel.

Another tap. And Joanne tilted to the side and looked up at Kyle.

Kyle screamed and staggered backward.

Joanne's face was covered with thread, crisscrossed with thread, all over her face, around her neck. And one eye was held open—held permanently open by the coils of thread.

"Oh, God, no," Kyle said. "Oh, please no."

The sewing machine ground to a halt.

"No," Kyle moaned.

Something moved behind her.

Of course, she thought. Of course. Chucky's still here. He's been playing games with me. He's—

She turned around in time to see the bedspread rise up, as if it were hiding a ghost. And then a hole was ripped in the spread.

Kyle staggered backward—bumping the mummy of Joanne.

And then Chucky leaped out at her.

* * *

The knife, she thought. *You've got the knife!*

But Kyle was much too slow in getting it up. Chucky hit her hard and grabbed her around the neck.

"No . . . ," she said. But then she felt his little doll arm start to squeeze her neck. And his mouth . . .

It moved! It's human!

. . . was right at her neck, chopping at her like a mad dog. She fell back to the wall, brushing past the mummy Joanne, whose one eye watched her.

She hit something . . . a lamp. It crashed to the floor. She felt Chucky's teeth bite down on some of her skin.

His other hand held her knife down. She tried to force her hand up, to bring the knife up to Chucky, but she couldn't move it.

How could he be so strong? she thought hopelessly.

She staggered again, and then fell to her knees, on top of shards of the broken lamp. Then she felt the knife move.

Not toward Chucky. But toward her own face.

She watched it move, slowly, toward her face. Even though she was pushing as hard as she could the other way.

She felt the broken shards at her knees, digging in and cutting to the bone. She reached down with her free hand and picked up a big jagged chunk of the lamp.

"You bastard," she hissed and swung the chunk against the doll's head. It made a great cracking noise, and the doll flew off her. As it flew away, it ripped the switchblade from her hands.

She rubbed her throat and coughed. But then she scanned the room. Where is he? she thought. He's so damn small, he could be anywhere. She forced herself to stand, while she watched the bed, the table, the chair, any place where Chucky could hide.

Flopped over to one side, dead Joanne watched her.

He's still gotta be here, Kyle thought. He's going to jump out—just like he did last time.

I know it . . . I know it . . . I know it.

She edged her way to the bed, moving to the door, snapping her head around repeatedly, checking for those red sneakers, that striped T-shirt.

He's got the knife, she told herself. The little creep has the knife!

She circled the bed, keeping her legs away from the bottom, away from the dark places where he could hide.

Maybe I hurt him, she thought. Maybe he got hurt bad and I'll be able to get out.

The curtains moved. They flapped slowly, sleepily. Once. Twice. And then they lay still. But she felt the breeze. It was just the wind.

She turned from the curtain. Thinking, I almost got tricked. I must keep looking, all the time. She moved against the wall—and the wall disappeared and she fell backward.

Into the closet. Something brushed against her head. A hanger tumbled to the floor. She pushed herself off the clothes and out of the closet.

She ran to the door and then looked into the hall. He could be waiting for me there, she knew. But there was no one there. The curtain flapped again, and she turned with lightning speed.

Just the wind, she thought.

She backed into the hall.

But something caught her feet, tripping her. Her arms went out—too late—to break her fall. And she tumbled backward onto the hallway floor.

23

He slammed his sneaker right on her neck.

“You bitch, you hurt me!”

Kyle tried to suck in air. Chucky climbed on top of her chest, still pinning her throat. She could see him clearly now. His face moved like a human face, but it was this sick doll’s face—pudgy and rosy-cheeked, on a squat doll’s body. Blood was oozing out of his doll’s nose.

Andy was right, she thought. He has to get out of that body, or he’ll be trapped forever.

Chucky moved his sneaker away and replaced it with the point of the blade. “Nice pig-sticker you got.” Chucky traced a figure eight at her throat.

But with the red sneaker gone, she could breathe. And if she could breathe, she could talk. “You . . . you don’t want my soul,” she gasped. “Believe me, it’s worthless.”

He sneered and reached down and grabbed her scarf. He pulled it off her neck and brought it up tight to his nose.

“I’ve got other plans for you,” he honked from the folded-up scarf. “It’s the kid I need and”—he pressed the point of the knife into her skin, just the tiniest bit—“you’re going to help me. I’m running out of time.”

He took the scarf off and changed its folds, looking at the blood. “Shit,” he said, looking at it. Then he stared at Kyle and said, “I’m running out of time, babe.”

He eased off her body, moving the knife from her neck and then down, around to her back.

“Now get up very slowly . . . very”—he jabbed with the knife—“slowly.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she said. Her voice sounded thin, distant. As if she didn’t know who was talking. She kneeled forward, pulling herself up.

The tip of the blade never left her skin.

“You’re going to get the car keys, kiddo. And then”—the blade was planted at the bottom of her spine—“you’re going to take me for a little ride.”

Kyle slowed down, pulling the station wagon beside a car with two men in it who looked over at her with undisguised interest.

She told herself once more, I'm not going to die. Not now. He needs me. And the longer he needs me, the longer I do what he wants—the longer I live.

One of the men in the car smiled at her, a toothy grin that had all the attractiveness of an alligator's yawn.

She looked ahead. "How much farther?" he asked.

It wasn't a doll's voice anymore. He could obviously turn that on and off, at will. Now it was a demented voice, like a gangster on helium. He was sitting beside her with the knife point aimed at her rib cage.

I bet he knows just where to stick someone, she thought. I bet that's *no problem* for him.

The light changed to green, and the studs next-door gunned their Japanese sports car and screeched away. Pretty darn impressive, Kyle thought sarcastically. Never fails to make *me* shiver.

"How much?" the doll-man repeated.

"A ways . . . not much farther."

The tip of the knife danced around. He's letting me feel it, Kyle thought, reminding me of how close I am.

I don't want to die, she told herself. *I'll do whatever I have to do to live. Anything he needs.*

She grinned sadly to herself. And here I thought my life was worthless, she thought. All you need is an experience like this to demonstrate just how much you want to stay on the planet.

"Step on it!" he snapped. "Go faster."

She nodded and pressed down the accelerator.

The station wagon moved through the quiet streets. What time is it, Kyle thought. "What's the big rush?" she said.

He shoved the bloody, sopping scarf in front of her face. "This—you see this? If I don't get out of this body soon, I'll be trapped in here."

She nodded. That's why he needs Andy. That's why we're going to the center.

And I'm helping the little prick.

Because anything's better than dying.

Anything.

She took a corner fast, and the wheels screeched. Chucky's knife hand was steady against her. She looked up to the rearview mirror. She saw a reddish blur, and then she heard the siren.

"Shit!" Chucky said.

She saw the cop hurry right on her tail, flash her with his brights. The red light swirled round and round.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked Chucky.

"Floor it!" he yelled, his voice even more stressed out and hyper.

"Get real," she said. "This is a station wagon."

The doll hesitated. Then, "Damn. Pull over. But don't try any shit, you hear me?" The knife pressed against her side.

She slowed the car, and then she found a space to pull into. The cop car was right on her tail, slowing behind her.

She waited there, watching the shadowy figure of the cop in his car . . . calling in the license plate, checking to see whether the car was stolen.

They don't know about Joanne yet. Or what really happened to Phil.

She started to think what she could do—

Then Chucky leaned close to her. "Behave yourself, sweet-cakes. Because if you don't, I'll kill you." She heard him close the switchblade, but he kept the closed end touching her side. Ready to spring open in a second.

The cop got out of his car and lumbered toward her, slowly, cautiously. He came next to her window and rapped on the glass. Kyle rolled the window down. "Let's see your driver's license, Miss," he said.

She dug around in her purse and pulled out the laminated card.

She handed it to him. He studied it as if there were a secret message encoded on it. Then he tapped it against his palm—a hostage—and said, "You were clocked doing sixty in a forty-five zone. What's the hurry?"

She felt the closed blade nudge her side.

He'll kill us both, she knew. No question about it. That's not a big decision when you're a maniac.

She smiled at the cop. "I . . . I've got a date."

He nodded. "You're going to have to do better than that." He looked at her, then past her. "Hey, isn't that one of those Good Guys?"

She turned to Chucky. The doll sat beside her, staring out the windshield.

"Yes . . . yes it is."

And please don't get close to him, Officer. You look like a nice man. You've probably got kids and stuff. Don't get too close to him because, you see—he'll slit your throat.

"I just love those things." He stuck his head in the window, looking

at the doll.

No, she wanted to say. Please.

"What's your name, fella?"

She waited. It seemed to take an eternity.

But Chucky turned slowly, deliberately, and looked right at the cop. Just what a Good Guy is supposed to do. And he said, "Chucky."

It was almost a Good Guy voice.

Almost.

The cop grinned. "Wow. That's amazing, isn't it?" he said, looking at Kyle.

Kyle took a breath as the cop pulled his head out of the car, both his ears and his jugular vein intact. "I'll say."

"Really."

The cop stopped, and Kyle turned to look at Chucky. His nose had started leaking blood again. A tiny red stream trailed down from one plastic nostril, down his cheek.

"Hey," the cop said. "What the hell is that?"

Don't ask, she wanted to scream. Just don't ask. You don't want to know from nothing about this particular Good Guy.

She felt Chucky's hand moving on his switchblade.

Oh, no.

"You've seen those dolls that pee?" Kyle said quickly. "Well, this one bleeds."

The cop screwed up his face, then shook his head. "Bleeds. Hell, what will they think of next?"

How about dolls that cut your head off? she thought.

The cop backed away from the window, perhaps a bit disgusted by this novel idea for a doll. "Okay." He handed her back her driver's license. "Just take it a bit slower, okay?"

Kyle smiled and took back her license.

The cop shook his head again at the doll and then walked back to his squad car.

Not knowing, Kyle thought, just how lucky he really was.

Kyle felt Chucky's hand padding around the seat, searching for the scarf. He wiped his cheek. Then he turned to her and spoke through the soaked material.

"Now start the car."

* * *

Mrs. Poole tucked Andy in, nice and snug. She smiled at him and

ruffled his hair.

But he knew—*knew*—what she had to be thinking.

I did it to Phil. I made him fall. I'm the reason he's dead. Because no one believes in Chucky. No one—except my mom.

And that policeman who saw Chucky was still alive—after they had burned him and ripped him to pieces. Still alive.

'Cause nothing can kill Chucky.

Mom was away somewhere, where they put people who tell lies, crazy lies. And the policeman—was he? Probably in the same place, he thought. And that's probably where they'll send me.

Mrs. Poole stood up. She smiled nicely at him. She's a nice lady, he thought, but he knew it had to be an act.

"You all set, Andy?" He nodded. "Good. I'll be here late tonight. So if you need something, anything at all, just call me."

How about a G.I. Joe bazooka, Andy thought. Maybe that would stop Chucky.

And as Mrs. Poole turned to leave, he was amazed to discover something. Something about himself.

He wasn't scared of Chucky. Not like before.

No. He wanted only one thing. He wanted to get Chucky. To stop him. If that was possible.

Mrs. Poole walked to the door. "Good night, Andy."

"Good night," Andy said back.

She walked out the door. Andy lay in bed, in the dark room, and waited.

He heard her footsteps moving away, down the hall. When he couldn't hear her anymore, he popped up in his bed. He ran over and pulled a wooden chair to the door. He tilted the chair back on two of its legs. Then he pushed the back of the chair under the doorknob.

He had seen it done in a movie once.

He pushed the chair hard, and he felt it jam against the floor and the doorknob.

He stepped back.

There, he thought. It might not keep Chucky out, but at least I'll know if he tries to get in.

With that comforting thought, he hurried back to bed, off the cold floor—and pulled the covers over his head.

24

They were closer, just blocks away.

Kyle knew that as soon as they got there, as soon as they got to Andy, her life would end. Chucky wouldn't need her anymore.

He'll go into Andy's body . . . and Andy?

Kyle thought of the boy trapped in the doll's body. Trapped, for as long as Chucky would let him live. He'd probably toss him in an incinerator, or a trash compactor. He couldn't have a doll running around saying, "Hi, I'm Andy—and the little boy is a mad killer."

She passed another corner, another block closer to the center.

"Can't you get this heap to move faster?" Chucky whined. Then, taking care to keep the re-opened switchblade jutting into her side, he stood up and leaned close to the dashboard for a better look at the windshield. "Would it help if I got out and pushed?"

Kyle sighed. Her pulse was racing. These are my last minutes, she thought. There has to be *something* I can do, a way to stop . . .

"We'll get stopped again. Cops are everywhere this time of night."

Chucky shook his head.

And she got an idea.

She reached to her left and pulled the seat belt over to her right, as quietly as she could.

It didn't matter. Chucky was ranting now, making a ton of noise, banging on the dashboard, racing against time.

"Forget them!" He turned to her, just a second after she slid the seat belt into its buckle. "And forget you—you've already wasted too much of my time."

His doll eyes went wide, and his plastic lips pulled back from his teeth in a grisly sneer.

She was going sixty. Sixty-five miles per hour. Seventy.

And she hit the brakes.

While the car screeched and the engine died, Chucky shot through the windshield like a cannonball. The glass shattered and sprayed over Kyle. She tried to watch him fly, to see where the little bastard landed, but the station wagon spun around and around, banging against something, tipping to the left. It felt as if it might just roll right over. She thought she would throw up.

But then it stopped.

She wasted no time in looking through the windshield. She saw him, flat on his belly, just ahead. The switchblade was feet away.

She started the car.

She watched Chucky.

He got up, slowly, stunned by his flight through space. He got up on his doll knees and looked around for his blade.

“Oh, no,” Kyle said.

Chucky turned and saw her. He was smeared with dirt. There were fresh bloody streaks on his face. She watched him look around for his knife again.

No you don’t, Kyle thought, and now she put the car into drive and floored the accelerator. Chucky ran for the blade, but she aimed right at him, the car slowly picking up speed, momentum.

He looked at her charging at him, his bloody, dirty face clear in the glare of the headlights. He stopped, seeing that he wasn’t going to be able to get the knife. He quickly jumped back to his left, away from the car.

Kyle hit the brakes. In the rearview mirror, she saw him running toward the blade again. She flipped the automatic transmission into reverse, and barely a second after she had it in place, she sped backward. She kept her eyes on the mirror, watching him move to the blade.

But again he wasn’t going to be able to reach it. He stopped—right in the station wagon’s path—and then bounced backward, falling on his rump.

She passed him and again hit the brakes.

She threw the car into drive and charged him again.

Now she was close. Now there was no time left for the little bastard to get out of the way. She was heading right for him.

And she saw something delicious in his face. Something wonderful, something that made her smile.

Fear.

That little creep is scared.

He backed away, then moved left and right, trying to avoid the wheels of the station wagon. But Kyle kept swerving, making it hard for him to dodge them.

Until the car was almost on top of him.

Kyle used the wagon’s hood to aim the car. She heard a thud.

But she hadn’t been looking ahead, beyond Chucky, to the curb, to the construction ditch by the side of the road.

The car bounced up, on the sidewalk, and then it tilted, sliding into

the ditch before it hit something that wouldn't move.

Kyle tried to turn the steering wheel, but her head had shot forward as the car stopped. Great red blotches swirled before her eyes. It was quiet. Her head throbbed.

I got him, she thought. I got him.

But then there was another voice, suggesting that you can never really get someone like Chucky. She shot up and looked at the rearview mirror.

She saw him. Getting up once again, the indestructible Charles Lee Ray. A never-say-die kinda guy.

She fumbled for the ignition, and grasping it, she went to start the car.

It didn't start.

"Come on, come on, come on," she said. She kept turning the ignition. The idiot lights would flash on brightly, and the engine would turn over with a sick grinding noise and then cough.

She took her foot off the accelerator, trying to clear her head. I'm flooding it, she thought. I'm flooding the engine. She turned the key again and again.

She watched Chucky pick up the switchblade. It glowed red, reflecting the wagon's brake lights.

She looked up, and now Chucky was nowhere to be seen. Kyle looked at the door locks, all of them open. She looked all around, expecting Chucky to leap up from anywhere and jab the knife—her knife—into her body.

She slammed all the locks down, grunting as she reached.

She waited, still trying the car engine, hearing the starter click more and more feebly as she drained the battery.

Until she realized she had been sitting there for a long time.

Waiting.

He's not here, she thought.

She looked out the broken windshield and saw a familiar place. Just a little way up the street. She hadn't even realized how close they were.

There it was . . . the Children's Crisis Center. She smiled at the thought. Does this qualify? Is this a crisis enough?

He's gone for Andy, she thought.

She said his name. "Andy."

But I know how to get inside quicker. There are other doors, other ways—ways that Chucky wouldn't know.

She reached over her left shoulder and pulled up the door lock. And

then slowly, feeling how her body ached, she popped the door open.

She stepped out, into the ditch, her eyes fixed on the Children's Center, looking for a sign of Chucky running to the building. The street was deserted. She went to slam the door shut.

She turned, and there he was.

Chucky—standing on the roof, a muddy, scraped-up kid who had been playing in the streets too long. He grabbed her hair and pushed the knife against her throat, grinning.

She moaned.

And Chucky, using her hair to force her head tight against the blade, said, "Olly-olly-oxen-free."

Andy heard Mrs. Poole's steps in the hall. One of the kids had cried out in his sleep. They always did that here. This was a place where kids cried, where they had nightmares.

He heard Mrs. Poole saying good night. Sleep tight. Trying to act as if she cared, as if she were a mom. But that's all it was . . . an act. It was really just her job.

He lay there, feeling how heavy his eyes were but not knowing whether he would be able to sleep. He wondered whether he should get up and check the door again, check that the chair was still wedged against the doorknob. Though he guessed that wouldn't stop him. Not Chucky.

Nothing could stop Chucky.

And if I do go to sleep, he thought, how long will it be before I cry out, before I scream for help?

He lay there, listening to the building, the tiny sounds, the creaks, the knocks, the terrible stillness of a building filled with sleeping kids.

Then the bell began ringing.

He shot up in bed.

The bell was loud, ringing terribly clear and fast right outside his door. He heard it echo through the whole building, the ringing rumbling from other floors.

Then he heard the screams of the kids. Running down the halls, their screams joining, turning into one more terrible sound.

It's the fire alarm, Andy thought. The fire alarm. The building's on fire and I have to get out of it.

He slid off the bed and moved to his door. In the darkness he didn't see the chair at the door, and he bumped into it. He pulled at the chair but was surprised to feel how strongly it was locked under the doorknob. The kids' screaming, and crying too, filled the hall outside

now. He could imagine them, especially the little ones, not big seven-year-olds like himself, falling on the cold floor and lying there, waiting for someone to get them.

He pulled at the chair again.

And it moved, popped away. It sent Andy tumbling backward. He hurried to open his door. And when he did he saw the big kids, the teenagers, smiling. And some of them looked at him and yelled, “Fire drill!”

Andy looked left and right, and then he sniffed the air. I don’t smell any smoke, he thought. I don’t smell anything burning. And I know what burning things smell like because I smelled Chucky burn. I know what that was like.

He hesitated a moment and then joined the stream of kids running down the hall to the stairs.

A few of the floor counselors held the hands of the really little kids, holding them tight. The bells kept ringing.

Andy walked to the staircase. He saw the line of kids disappear, hurrying down to the first floor and out the door. He grabbed the railing and followed them.

He was halfway down when he looked at the bottom of the stairs, where everyone was rushing out the door.

Someone was standing there.

Right at the bottom.

Waiting for him.

It was Kyle.

He said her name as he took step after step down. “Kyle,” he said.

And he saw who she had with her.

He saw Chucky, held tight, his head right near her shoulder.

He stopped moving.

But Grace Poole came from behind him and grabbed his hand. “Come on, Andy. Let’s get down and see what’s going on here.”

She tugged at his hand. He grabbed the railing. As hard as he could.

Mrs. Poole turned and looked at him. “An-dy! Come on. We have to get out.” She tugged at him. “Out of the . . .” And again. “Building!”

And this time his hand slipped off the rail, and she pulled him down the remaining steps, down to Kyle, down to Chucky.

Mrs. Poole didn’t see them until she was at the hallway.

“Kyle?” she said, looking up. “Kyle, what are you doing here?”

Andy tugged against the woman, but her hand was locked on his.

“What is this? What are you doing here, Kyle?”

Kyle didn't say anything. Andy saw a bloody mark on her head. Then he looked down at the broken glass at her feet. Mrs. Poole looked down and saw it too . . . and she looked back at the smashed glass window of the fire alarm.

She dragged Andy a few steps closer. "You did this, didn't you, Kyle? You came back here, and did this."

Mrs. Poole turned and told some of the counselors to get the children back inside. Then she pulled Andy along as she pushed Kyle into her office.

Mrs. Poole moved closer to Kyle, and Andy wriggled on her arm, trying to squirm away. "Please," he muttered.

Kyle shook her head.

Andy froze, watching her. Knowing what she was going to say.

"He did it," Kyle said. Nodding toward Chucky.

"Wh—what?" Mrs. Poole said. Then, angry now, "What are you talking about? Is this your idea of a joke?"

Andy watched her take another step closer to Kyle.

Kyle was standing as if she were a statue. He saw Chucky—perfectly still. In one of Chucky's hands he held something next to Kyle's neck, something thin and black.

"Your case worker will hear about this, Kyle. I can guarantee that. Just as soon as we get everything settled here."

She reached out and grabbed Chucky.

"Give me that!" she said.

Kyle moaned, "No."

Andy slipped out of Mrs. Poole's grasp as she pulled Chucky from Kyle, not noticing that Chucky held something in his left hand.

She looked down. Then she saw it.

"What's this? What in the world is this . . . thing?"

"No!" Kyle yelled. Andy backed away.

And Chucky came to life. He turned and looked right at Mrs. Poole. His fingers worked a latch at the end of the black thing, and a blade popped out, cutting right into Mrs. Poole. She gagged.

"Amazingly lifelike, isn't it?" Chucky said.

He pulled the blade out and jabbed it in again, faster and faster and faster, while Andy watched, stumbling back, tripping on a chair, falling against the wall.

In and out, and in and out, until the woman staggered around the room, grabbing at the air.

Chucky used his free hand to hold onto her blouse, which had suddenly changed from a starched white to a gummy red. Mrs. Poole

spit at the air, trying to say words.

She tumbled toward a big gray machine in the corner.

A copy machine, Andy knew. Her head slammed down on the flat surface of the machine, and she must have hit a button, because the machine shook and began making clicking noises.

Papers began flying out of a slot in the end of the machine, piling up until they started slipping out of a small tray, dropping to the floor.

They were pictures of Mrs. Poole's face. Andy could see the pictures. They showed one big eye open. And lips pulled back from teeth, and great big blackish specks that—he knew—in real life were red.

Someone grabbed his hand.

Kyle.

"Come on!" she said. She pulled him toward the door. Andy let himself be pulled, not really sure where she was taking him.

After all, there's no point in running, he thought. We know that now, don't we? Just no point.

"Come on!" Kyle yelled again.

Kyle ran out of the office into the hall, pulling Andy behind her.

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Andy saw Chucky's small red sneaker kick the door, and slam it shut. It banged on Andy's hand, separating him from Kyle.

The door slammed shut.

Then Andy felt the bloody blade against his throat. And he thought, This is Mrs. Poole's blood. It dripped on Andy while all the time the copy machine kept whirring away, belching up pictures of the nice woman's head.

Chucky reached up and locked the door.

There's no way to escape Chucky, he knew. No way at all.

He heard Kyle pounding on the door, screaming, "Andy! Open the door! *Open the door!"*

The blade, the trick blade that popped out from nowhere like magic, pressed against his neck.

And Andy stayed perfectly still.

Kyle kept pounding.

"Okay, sport," Chucky hissed in his ear, "we're going to have a little game of 'Chucky says.' You understand?"

Andy nodded. Then he heard something, in the distance but growing louder.

Sirens.

He saw Chucky look at the window. The sirens were right outside. A red light flashed on and off, on and off in the room.

"Shit!" Chucky cursed.

It's not nice to curse, Andy thought.

Chucky shouldn't do that. It's just not . . . nice.

The copy machine kept shaking and grumbling. The red light flickered on and off. Chucky turned to Andy, his face sneering. "Goddamn it."

Kyle kept pounding.

Chucky tilted his head to the open window. "Chucky says, 'Move your ass.' "

Chucky directed Andy with the blade, guiding him over to where Mrs. Poole lay slumped. He had to step in a red pool on the green rug. It looked almost blackish. Andy stopped moving. He stood there and watched the woman's lifeless body.

It looked like something he might see in a museum. Some stuffed animal in the African Hall.

Chucky slapped him.

"Snap out of it! You act as if you've never seen a dead body before."

Andy reached up to the open window and grabbed the sill. He pulled himself up, helping by Chucky pushing from below.

Friends to the end.

Hidey-ho.

The door was a solid piece of wood, and Kyle's pounding was doing no good. She looked down at the doorknob, at the lock, and had an idea.

She ran a hand through her hair and pulled out a bobby pin. Then she crouched in front of the lock. She bent the pin into a probe and began to dig around in the lock.

Just like they do in the movies, she thought.

But her fiddling did nothing.

The door remained locked even after a few tantalizing clicks inside the lock.

"Damn it," Kyle whispered. "Give me a break."

She heard the sirens outside. Soon there would be police here, maybe firemen. They could chop the door with an ax.

But by then it might be too late.

She heard a different sound from the lock. A more solid click.

She grabbed at the knob and gave it a violent twist.

The door opened.

She saw the empty office. And the open window . . . with the curtain blowing in the cool night breeze.

"Move your ass, sport. Just keep going."

Andy nodded. Chucky was on Andy's shoulder. He had his legs wrapped around him, and he had one arm on Andy's neck. His other hand held the blade right next to Andy's skin, jiggling up and down, scratching with every bouncy step Andy took.

Andy let Chucky's legs direct him. This must be what it's like to be a pony, Andy thought. Kick—go left. Kick—go right. And then—a tiny press of the blade.

Don't you dream of stopping, kiddo.

They passed the kids who were standing on the lawn, laughing now. It was like a party out here with the bright lights from the fire trucks

and the scary costumes of the fire fighters who were running in and out of the building.

Andy saw a little kid crying, looking around for anyone bigger to pick him up.

But Chucky just kept him moving away from the corner, off the lawn, and down the street. Until the sounds faded, and all he heard was the rustle of Chucky's Good Guy corduroys rubbing against his neck.

Chucky gave him a sharp kick. Andy, who had been running, looking down at the sidewalk, looked up and saw a van . . . just ahead.

The back door was open.

"There we go, sport." Chucky whispered in his ear. Then, "Now get the hell inside . . . and hurry."

Andy nodded, making the blade scratch his neck again.

Kyle got to the window and looked out. For a second she couldn't see anything, just the lawn filled with out-of-control kids and all the firemen. The red lights kept flashing in her face, blinding her.

Then, all the way across the lawn, she saw someone running away.

For a second she thought it was an adult. It had to be an adult. Too tall for Andy, or Chucky.

She watched the figure for a few more seconds. And she knew who it was. Chucky. Riding on Andy's back. Using him like some sick animal to carry him away.

She started to go out the window . . .

And then hesitated.

He's not my kid, she thought, he's just another kid with no one who cares about him.

So why should I get bashed around anymore for him?

It's not my problem.

But then she thought, That's just it. He's got no one. Just like me. He's all alone.

"The hell he is," she said to herself, and she climbed out the window.

Kyle had to weave her way through the kids, nearly knocking some of them down, stepping around giddy groups of boys and girls.

She followed Andy and Chucky to the sidewalk. He hasn't seen me, she thought. And I know I can go faster than Andy. He's just a little kid, he . . . he's just seven.

She saw them, closer now.

And she saw the van with the open back.

Andy ran up to it and popped the back door open further.

“No,” she said, running full out, as fast as she could, gasping for air.

Those lousy cigarettes! she thought, fighting for wind, feeling the terrible burn in her lungs.

She watched Andy carry Chucky into the back of the van.

And then the door slammed closed.

A man hurried out of a building and got into the front.

“Hey!” she yelled at him. “Hey you!” she yelled again. But she heard his door close. She knew he hadn’t heard her. “Stop!” she yelled.

The engine started up. The lights came on.

No, she thought. Don’t pull away.

She was almost to the van. She saw Andy’s face against the glass and, right next to him, Chucky. Leering, grinning at her.

As the van’s engine revved up.

She saw the switchblade against Andy’s neck. He’s not crying, she saw. Why isn’t Andy crying?

The van screeched away, and Kyle staggered to a stop . . . gasping for breath.

But no, she thought. I can’t stop. I can’t.

The van disappeared down the street.

Kyle found Joanne’s wagon where she had left it, in the ditch, looking dead and useless. She saw the windshield, the tiny shards of glass littering the front seat.

She ran around to the driver’s door and got in. The keys still dangled from the ignition. She slammed the door shut and caught herself just as she was about to give the engine some gas before turning the key.

Can’t flood it, she told herself.

She took a breath.

She turned the key.

Fitful clicks. The idiot lights flashed on.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Start, you big piece of . . .”

She rammed her foot down on the accelerator, and the car snapped to life, the engine roaring.

Okay, she thought. Now if I can just get this suburban nightmare out of the ditch. She tried to go forward, but the wheels were pinned,

and she saw a spray of mud shoot up into the air. She tried reverse, and the car backed out of the ditch. She gunned it, flooring the accelerator, until the wagon backed up onto the road.

She shifted into forward and steered down the street, in the same direction taken by the van.

The air buffeted her, blowing into her eyes, sending her hair swirling. Where are you? she thought. If that van had turned, she could easily miss it.

She ran a yellow light that threatened to slow her. Then a red one. And she wasn't going to stop for a cop.

Then—just ahead—she saw something. She drove faster down another block. It was the van.

"Thank you," she muttered.

The van was stopped at a light. Just when Kyle was only a block away, the light changed to green and the driver turned.

"Damn!" Kyle said.

She took the corner on two wheels, both of them screeching. She leaned to the side, right into a chunk of window glass.

The van took another corner. But this time when Kyle got to the same corner, the van was gone. "What?" she said.

She kept on going, thinking, How could it have just disappeared? It wasn't parked on the street. It must have turned—right away—at the next intersection. But then she passed an alleyway and happened to look down the narrow strip that cut across to another block.

And she saw the van.

She cut the steering wheel hard, pushing the wagon as fast as it could go. She was into the alley before she wondered if the obese car would fit. Maybe it will get stuck, she thought. Maybe the darn car's too wide for the alley.

But it careened down the alley—barely fitting, picking up garbage cans and boxes along the way, scattering them in front like the cowcatcher of a train. She saw sparks flying from the side where the car scraped the wall of the building . . .the warehouse.

This is some kind of industrial place, she thought. Lots of big, dark buildings.

Something about that bothered her. What was here? What was—?

She rocketed out of the alleyway, sending the garbage cans careening across the street. And now the van was close, just there, just ahead.

"I got you, sucker," she said. And then . . . more quietly, "I'm coming, Andy. Just . . . hang . . . on."

Chucky tightened his grip around Andy's neck.

He moved the blade from the side to just under Andy's chin. When Andy gulped, he felt his Adam's apple rubbing against the blade.

"Say your prayers, Andy. It's chanting time."

I can't move, Andy thought. I'll just have to let him do this. He heard Chucky say those words again, dumb words that made Andy feel dizzy . . . sick.

"Ade due, Damballa, *Ade kisalla, ade . . ."*

Then the back windows filled with light. It blinded Andy, and it blinded Chucky. He blinked. The blade moved from Andy's neck a bit.

The lights—really bright lights—flashed on and off, on and off. Andy couldn't see the car, couldn't see who was driving.

The lights flashed off again, and he saw Kyle, holding the steering wheel of the station wagon like a crazy woman.

Chucky saw her too. "Damn it!" he said. Kyle started blasting her horn. "The bitch is too late, Andy," Chucky cackled. "Too late."

He shot Kyle the middle finger.

And then he turned back to Andy.

* * *

Kyle passed the van, pushing the wagon as fast as she could. She drove abreast of the driver and yelled to him.

"Pull over!"

The driver gave her a look as if she were an escaped mental patient. "Pull over!" she repeated.

The van driver picked up speed.

No way, buster, she thought. She floored her pedal and threw the wagon in front of the van, cutting it off. The van hit its brakes, screeching. Kyle stopped the wagon just before it went flying onto the sidewalk.

She jumped out of the car and was met by the driver, who was about six-two, with one mighty displeased puss on him.

Kyle was running to the back of the van when he grabbed her arm and squeezed it with sufficient force to stop her dead. "Whoa! Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Let me go!" Kyle yelled at him. She tried to pull away, but the man just tightened his gorilla grip.

"What is the matter with you? Are you crazy, or . . ."

Right, she thought. I'm crazy. She gave him a quick kick to a knee.

Her arm was freed instantly, and she ran to the back of the van.

The door was open.

The back of the van was empty.

No. Please . . . Kyle turned and looked around. She saw Andy, still carrying Chucky on his back. They were running back to the buildings, the warehouses.

The driver started coming for her.

Kyle screamed out the boy’s name. “Andy!” And ran after them. While the driver yelled at her, “You crazy brat!”

She kept her eyes on Andy, now in darkness, now catching a bit of light from a naked light bulb by a door. Chucky’s taking him someplace, she knew. He knows where he’s going, as if . . .

She heard something moving, up near the top of a building. It was the heavy clanking of machinery, moving back and forth, following a repetitive rhythm. She kept running, while she looked up.

And she saw a giant Good Guy. A monster-sized Good Guy, looking down at her, waving at her.

Bye-bye, Kyle. You’ll never catch me. I’m home, babe. This is my place.

Her foot got caught in a crack on the street, and she fell, grunting, slamming her elbows hard against the ground. She landed in a puddle that sprayed her with muddy water.

A few gritty drops landed on her lips, and she could taste them. She looked up.

Just in time to see Andy disappear down an alley.

Right under the sign that said, Play Pals Toys. She jumped to her feet and started after them.

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“Just keep moving, Andy boy. Just keep those little legs of yours pumping.”

Andy nodded. This is where he was born, he thought. This is the place where Chucky came from.

And then he thought, No. Chucky didn’t really come from here. He came from someplace else. Someplace evil.

“Now, cut down here, sport. Move it.”

Andy turned. His back and his neck ached. Chucky rode him like a pony, kicking at his sides, telling him where to go. And always the knife jiggled at Andy’s throat.

But when Andy turned down the alleyway, he heard sounds. A truck’s engine.

And voices.

“All right. Stop. Right here.” Chucky gave him a kick. “And back up, over to the corner.”

Andy backed into the corner of the building. While he stood in the darkness, Chucky could lean out and peer down the alleyway.

“Yeah,” he said. “We can get in there . . . in case anyone’s following us.”

Andy leaned a bit forward until he could see the truck. A machine was dumping boxes into the truck.

Boxes of Good Guys.

One last box tumbled in, and then the workmen pulled down the sliding door, sealing the back of the truck. One of the men ran around to the front, to the driver’s seat. Andy heard the engine start. The other worker turned a key, and the metal door on the factory entrance began coming down.

Slowly . . .

“All right!” Chucky hissed. “This is it.”

The other man hurried to the truck’s cab. Andy heard the man laugh. The truck roared away, making a big turn.

“Move it!” Chucky yelled. “Move it, you little creep.”

Andy ran for the loading doorway leading inside the factory. As he got to the door; he noticed how slowly it was coming down. He stopped at the steps leading up to the loading platform and the door. I don’t want to go in here, he thought.

Then Chucky kicked him. “Inside,” he said.

Andy nodded and took a breath. The knife was always on his skin, always touching his neck.

He walked into the building.

They went inside! Kyle also saw the truck disappearing down the block.

And, from too far away, she saw the great metal door to the warehouse gliding shut.

I’m not going to make it, she thought.

No way.

Chucky gave Andy a sharp kick—the runt learns fast—and like a good little horse, the boy stopped.

Because, Chucky thought, I got to see *this.*

All around them were mountains of dolls, hundreds of plastic faces, hundreds of flaming redheads who just wanted to play. The boxes towered above him, in piles stacked like buildings, with alleyways and small roads crisscrossing the warehouse floor.

They must be doing pretty good with all these Good Guys. Maybe—after this is all over—I’ll work on getting a piece of the action. Wouldn’t that be a rip? he thought.

He jiggled the blade against Andy’s neck. “We’re home, sport.”

Chucky looked back at the stacks of dolls. If only I could command them, he thought. Make them all come to life and work for me. Now, wouldn’t that be something?

He leaned closer to Andy. “And it’s time to play.” He rapped the back of Andy’s head with the handle of the switchblade, hard as he could, just above the brain stem. It doesn’t kill them—it just knocks them out real fast.

Chucky jumped off as Andy fell to the ground.

Now, he thought, we won’t be disturbed. And nobody will make a big deal about finding a Good Guy doll here . . . even if it is all smashed into a thousand pieces.

Must have been a manufacturing mistake.

It happens.

He stuck the knife in the back of his Good Guy coveralls and grabbed Andy’s body and turned him over.

“Close your eyes and count to seven. When you wake, you’ll be in heaven.”

The boy was out cold. Won’t even know what hit him, Chucky

thought. He looked around at the stacks of boxes that surrounded him. "This is it, world," he laughed. "From now on, no more Mr. Good Guy."

He leaned forward.

His movement felt so smooth, so natural. Must be getting used to this little body . . . this little doll's body.

He placed his hand on Andy's forehead.

"Ade due Damballa . . . ," he whispered. He heard a machine in the back. Probably just another conveyor belt. "Great Damballa, give me the power, I beg of you."

There was a crack of thunder, and he smiled.

"Give me the power . . . ," he whispered again.

* * *

She ran full out, watching the door glide shut.

I'll never make it, Kyle thought. Never.

She got to the steps and bounded up them three at a time. A lightning flash appeared from nowhere, and startled, she jumped away from her shadow on the warehouse wall.

The door was nearly shut.

About a foot left.

"Stop," she said. And as another dull thud of thunder boomed just overhead, Kyle rolled to the ground and spun her way to the closing door.

I'll either roll right through, she thought, or I'll get stuck and it will crush me.

A belt loop on her jeans got caught on a bump—a nail. Her roll was stopped as the she watched the door creak down another inch.

"No!" she yelled. She fiddled at her butt, trying to free the loop. It popped off, and with a terrible grunt, she threw herself through the crack.

The top of the closing door scraped against her shoulder blades, but it didn't stop her. She rolled inside and heard the door slam shut.

Sealing her in.

Chucky raised his voice to be heard. After all, there was so much thunder and lightning. So much. I feel your presence, he thought. You *are* here with me.

Chucky screamed out his chant. *"Leveau mercier du bois chaloitte, secoise entienne mais pois de mote."*

And again, even louder, as the thunder and lightning rumbled through the warehouse, echoing off the walls, from the dark corners.

He repeated the chant one more time.

The last time.

The thunder and lightning stopped.

* * *

Andy opened his eyes.

He didn't see anyone.

Where's Chucky? What's happened to him?

He felt the pain at the back of his skull. It throbbed, flashing on and off, like one of those blinking lights used to mark holes in the road.

Where's Chucky? he thought.

Then—a thought. It's happened.

It's happened. We swapped souls.

And *I'm* Chucky.

I'm a doll and . . .

Something plopped on Andy's forehead. Another plop, on his cheek. It ran down to his lip.

He tasted the salty, sweet taste of blood. He reached up and tried to catch the next drop.

Then Andy saw that he still had his own hand. It was *his* hand reaching up, a human hand.

I'm not a doll.

But Chucky's hand caught the drop. Andy twisted on the floor to get a look at Chucky.

His nose was bleeding again. Overflowing with blood that was dripping onto the ground. Andy saw the terrible way Chucky looked at his hand, looked at the blood.

He looks so confused, Andy thought.

Confused because . . . he's supposed to be me. It didn't work. It didn't work . . . because he's . . .

Too late.

Andy watched Chucky's face twist and turn, the plastic flesh rippling, the glass eyes shining, wide. Chucky slowly raised his fist into the air and filled the warehouse with his voice, screaming, "Noooooooooo!"

Andy tried to slide away, despite his throbbing head. I just want to lie down, he thought. I don't want any more pain.

Chucky turned and fixed him with his glassy eyes.

“You little shit!” He took a step toward Andy. “Do you realize . . .” He screamed the word as loudly as Andy’s mom had when he broke the sugar bowl. “. . . what you’ve done? Do you”—another step—“know what you’ve done to me?”

Andy kept trying to slide backward. He bumped into something. He turned and looked at the stack of Good Guy dolls.

“It’s too late!” Chucky yelled. “I’ve spent too much time in this body! I’m trapped in here.”

Andy watched as Chucky dug around in the back of his Good Guy coveralls. He watched him pull the switchblade out. Andy heard the latch click and the blade pop out. “And you’re trapped”—Chucky gestured at the warehouse—“in here . . . *with me!”*

Andy tried to stand up, but he was frozen. There didn’t seem to be any place to go. And his head hurt so much.

Then the boxes exploded from behind him, dozens of them, tumbling down on Chucky. A few bounced on Andy, smacking his head, crashing into his legs. But Chucky was buried.

And he heard a voice.

Kyle.

Yelling at him from above.

“Run, Andy. Get up and run!”

Kyle! She’s here. Just her voice was enough to get Andy scrambling to his feet, stepping onto the Good Guys in their plastic cases. He looked around for Kyle. He whispered her name.

Much too quietly for her to hear, he knew. He just wanted to hear the sound himself.

“Kyle?” He kept looking around. He finally saw her hurrying down a ladder from above. She was yelling at him, “Come on.”

Andy ran toward her, clambering over the fallen boxes and then turning down another alleyway, past another wall of Good Guys.

“Come on,” Kyle said, reaching the floor, waiting for him. Andy ran as hard as he could, even though his head still hurt and he felt sore all over. He pumped with his hands, thinking, I’m almost next to Kyle. And we can get out of here and leave Chucky and all the others behind.

Kyle’s hand reached out to him. “That’s a boy.” She smiled.

He took her hand, and she pulled him, running, nearly dragging him off his feet, flying down the aisles of Good Guys. Andy turned once and watched them, looked at the faces watching him.

He told himself not to do that again.

“There’s got to be another way out of here,” Kyle said. “Some side

door or something. And . . .”

But every turn Kyle took brought them down another alleyway, to another wall of Good Guys.

Like a maze, Andy thought. He knew there were some mazes you just couldn’t ever get out of.

No matter how long you tried.

They came to an intersection. Kyle stopped. Andy saw her bite her lip. She looked up one alley, then another. Then she looked at Andy. “This way,” she said, pulling him to the left.

But Andy knew she didn’t have any idea where to go. We’re lost in a maze, he thought.

He ran behind Kyle now, growing tired. He heard a sound, a machine noise ahead of them. There was something ahead, something . . .

The wall exploded.

And Chucky leaped at him from behind a wall of Good Guy dolls. He grabbed Andy around the ankles.

“No!” Andy called to Kyle.

Kyle turned and saw him as he fell, hard to the concrete floor.

It won’t take him long, Andy knew. Just a quick cut at my neck. That’s all it will take. He wants me dead now.

Andy turned over just in time to see Chucky crawl on top of him with the knife, moving fast now, too fast for anyone to do anything.

But Kyle had taken a giant step toward Andy, and she kicked Chucky in his butt.

It was a good kick, Andy thought.

No, a *great* kick, he thought, as he watched Chucky go sailing into the air, over the stacks of dolls.

“Get up!” Kyle yelled at him, pulling his hand.

She led him straight ahead, straight toward the noise, to the machine.

Then Andy saw it. Kyle stopped to look at it, study it.

There was a big conveyor belt entering from a gap in the wall. It was completely covered with a fence, creating a tunnel effect. Good Guy boxes moved down the belt and tumbled into a giant bin.

The fence keeps the boxes from falling off, Andy saw.

The boxes of Good Guy dolls were dumped in a great pile at the other end.

It doesn’t seem as if they need any more Good Guys, he thought. Don’t they already have enough?

He heard something from behind. Little steps. He turned and tugged at Kyle's hand.

"I know," she said. "This way!" She pulled him to the open end of the belt, where the boxes tumbled out. There were steps there, and a platform.

Andy knew what Kyle wanted to do.

Kyle climbed the steps, pulling Andy up with her. He held her hand tightly.

I know what she wants to do, he thought. But I don't know if I can do it.

The belt was moving fast, dotted with Good Guy boxes. The wire tunnel sealed it in. There was just this opening . . . and another one, somewhere at the other end, in another building, through a wall.

In another building. Where the Good Guys are made.

Andy heard more footsteps. When he turned and looked back, he saw a shadow moving down the alleyway, Chucky's shadow, holding the knife up high.

Kyle took his chin in her hands. "Think you can do it?" she asked.

Andy looked at the belt rolling toward them. He knew what she wanted to do.

He nodded.

"Good boy," she said. "I'll go first. You just follow me . . . and do what I do."

Kyle jumped onto the belt and started walking. For a second she didn't seem to go anywhere, but then she took more steps. And she grabbed at the mesh of the tunnel, pulling herself forward. When a Good Guy box came along, she stepped over it.

"Come on, Andy. Come . . . on."

I'm not as big as Kyle, he thought. I can't take such big steps. I can't go as fast.

"Come on!"

Andy stepped onto the belt and immediately felt himself being whisked backward into the big dumpster filled with dolls. But he grabbed at the fence to try and hold himself in place. Then he ran.

When he got just a little bit ahead, he let go of the mesh and ran a few more feet.

Kyle turned to look at the front of the belt, at the hole leading into a different building.

Andy hurried to catch up with her.

But—at the same time—he turned to look backward.

He saw Chucky climbing up to the platform, up to the open end of

the conveyor belt.

Andy didn’t see the next Good Guy box in his path.

He tripped on it, and then he was flat on the belt, speeding backward.

Back to Chucky.

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Andy felt himself tumbling backward to the dumpster filled with brand new Good Guys.

Back to Chucky.

Kyle stopped at the opposite end of the conveyor belt, at the opening to the other building. She turned and yelled at him.

"Andy, get up! He's behind you! Please, get . . . up!"

Andy dug at the rubber ribs of the belt, as he also turned around and saw Chucky crawling behind him.

Andy watched Chucky grab at the mesh while he jabbed his knife into the belt, pulling himself along.

"An-dy!" Kyle screamed.

Andy turned, scrambling along the belt. He ran into one box, climbed over it, and then ran into another. And another. It was like a video game, like Super Mario jumping over mushrooms, climbing up walls.

"Andy!" Kyle kept yelling.

And then, from behind him, Andy heard the same word. "Andy."

I can't look back at him, Andy thought. If I look back at him, he'll get me. He saw Kyle leaning into the hole, reaching out for him. If I can just get to her hand, she'll pull me out.

Now he heard the thud as Chucky's blade dug into the belt. He's right behind me, Andy knew. He's right at my feet, my ankles. He'll grab me any second.

Andy felt the tips of Kyle's fingers. Then Kyle grunted and reached in. Her hand closed around his wrist. Another grunt, and she pulled him through the opening.

Into another place. The place where they make the dolls. No. He looked around the room. No, this is the place where the machines make the dolls.

They stood on another platform, and Andy had a few seconds to look at the conveyor belt as it wound its way through the factory, past all these strange machines. He saw headless Good Guy bodies and a machine that stuck heads on them and then another machine, like a big dentist's drill, that stuck eyes into the head.

He turned to Kyle, who was looking back into the hole, looking at Chucky.

She looked up. Just over the hole. Andy saw metal grating. Kyle reached up and slid it down, covering the open hole that led to the warehouse.

Just as Chucky got there, grinning at them.

Go. Away, Andy thought. Go away. And leave me alone.

Kyle hung her whole weight on the grating, and it slammed down, right on Chucky's hand. Andy watched Chucky's hand get trapped between the grating and the metal wall. Kyle snapped a lock shut on the grating's latch. While Chucky screamed. Andy saw the blood dripping from the doll's wrist.

He writhed, like a fish on a hook. And he pulled at his wrist trying to free it. Boxes of new Good Guys jammed against the closed hole. But there was no wire tunnel covering the conveyor belt here, and the boxes of finished dolls bunched up, pressing against the mesh, bumping right against Chucky's wrist, before they tumbled to the floor.

"Come on, Andy," Kyle said.

Chucky looked up at Andy. Go away, Andy thought. *Leave me alone!*

"Come on!" Kyle said again, and she pulled him off the platform.

More boxes clattered to the floor as they ran away.

Down the steps. Andy heard Chucky screaming at them now, rattling the locked grating, "Come back, you fuckers! Come back here!"

Come back, you little bastards . . . and maybe I won't hurt you so much when I catch you.

Chucky looked at his wrist. The mesh had pinned it to the metal and the barbs were dug straight through—straight through . . . what?

The flesh, the bone . . . the plastic? What am I now? And what am I going to do about it?

First things first. The old *gris-gris* will show me a way out. There has to be way out.

He wished he hadn't killed the old priest—using the old man's own *mojo.* I didn't think I'd need him anymore, he remembered.

I sure as hell need him now.

Blood splattered from his trapped hand every time he tried to pull or twist it. And the pain—oh, it was class A pain, white-hot pain, pain that made his eyes fill with brilliant red splotches. Total pain.

And they're getting away.

No, he thought, he couldn't allow that. No, they'd send people here. And they'd find me. And, boy, wouldn't that be fun?

He took the knife and wedged it between the grating and the metal frame. He tried to pry the grating up. If I just get a few inches, he thought. Just a few inches, and I can get my mangled hand loose.

The grating started to buckle upward. Even as the barbs dug into his wrist, chewing up whatever kind of flesh he had.

It's moving, he thought. The grate is moving!

The blade snapped.

It broke off from the handle as if it were a kid's toy.

"Oh, great," he moaned as the grating fell back into position.

Now the blade was stuck in the frame.

He looked up. He saw the girl—oh, he had something special in mind for her—leading the boy to the other side of the factory.

He looked at his trapped hand. He knew what he had to do. He felt the sweat on his brow, running down his Good Guy nose, dripping onto his lip. He took a breath.

"Yeah," he said. Then he started twisting, writhing, and turning, working his arm this way and that, back and forth.

He screamed. His eyes went red with the pain, but he kept at it, back and forth, as if working a piece of thin metal, trying to snap it—he groaned—in two.

His arm came flying back, dripping tendrils of blood and bits of torn plastic. He saw his hand still trapped, with the wires leading from it.

But he was free.

"Which way?" Andy asked her.

Kyle squeezed his hand. "I—I don't know, Andy. There has to be a door out of here, some—"

They walked past a tremendous vat. It smelled like bug spray, and from the steamy hiss it made, she knew it was hot. As they passed, she saw a dripping spigot on the side. Small dollops fell onto the stone floor. She read what it said by the spigot. Caution: Overflow Release.

And, next to the vat, the conveyor belt carried the torsos of Good Guys. A machine spit heads out onto the belt, squeezing them onto the bodies. Kyle watched, fascinated. The heads had no eyes.

"Which way?" Andy said.

"Let's try this," Kyle said, running to the right, hurrying, though she didn't know whether they were moving closer to some exit . . . or farther away. She only knew that they were following the path of the conveyor belt.

They passed another machine, this one shaped like a giant X. When a body arrived, the machine snapped closed, like a dry cleaner's

steaming pants press. When it popped open, the dolls had arms and legs.

“This is wrong,” Kyle said, looking around. “We’re heading back to the hole. The place where Chucky is trapped.”

But when she looked behind her, she saw that the conveyor belt looped back past another machine. She heard a rhythmic tat-tat sound, over and over, as the dolls rolled up to a machine that stapled the red hair on top of each doll’s head.

Then, just past that, another machine, with two long metal fingers—the last step—jabbed at the dolls, sticking eyes in their dark sockets.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Kyle said. “Or I’m going to lose my mind.”

Andy nodded. “Yes, but which way, Kyle? How do we get out?”

Kyle turned all the way around, without seeing an answer to Andy’s simple question.

While the conveyor belt tried to pull him back he held onto the grating, waiting for an idea. He let go of the mesh and snatched the broken blade from its trap between the grating and the frame.

The belt started carrying him backward.

He took the blade and jabbed the broken end into his bloody stump. He screamed and fell to his knees on the belt. The pile of Good Guy boxes was just behind him.

No time to give in to the pain, he thought. No time at all.

He looked around, searching the work tables he rolled past, looking for what he needed. The blood was gushing out of his stump, streaming down the blade he had just jammed into the bloody mesh of wires.

He turned around and saw a platform at the end of the conveyor belt.

He hopped to the side and saw a table below. Which had just what he needed.

He grabbed the roll of silvery duct tape off the work table. He brought it up to his mouth and bit the end. He pulled the tape out as far as he could.

Then he wrapped his stump in it, over and over, closing it tight near the blade, sealing the wound, and then on up his forearm until the blade was secure.

He stood and jabbed at the air. The pain was still there, but it was ebbing. He slashed left and right, thinking, This gives me great control!

He made a few more slices and jabs before looking around. Time to get the hell out of here and find them, he thought. The girl first, then Andy—nice and slow. Unless—

Should I keep the boy alive? Just in case? Maybe I'll need him. He would figure that out later.

He sniffed the air, smelling the weird mixture of plastic and blood, and said, "I hate kids."

He hurried to the other end of the warehouse, away from the conveyor belt.

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Kyle put a hand down and stopped Andy. They were next to the conveyor belt and the eye machine that jabbed at the dolls as they moved by.

"There we go, Andy," she said. "Do you see it?"

Andy didn't see much except the machine. It looked like some kind of bird, a prehistoric monster-bird pecking at the dolls. It was supposed to stick their glass eyes in their heads, but it really looked like it was going to peck their brains out.

"What?" Andy said.

"Over there, past the conveyor belt. Don't you see? It's an exit."

Andy looked. She was right. There was a big red sign that said, Exit, over a large brown metal door. There was only one problem. Andy didn't see any way to get to it.

He looked up to Kyle and saw that she was searching around with her eyes, trying to find some way to get to the other side, across the conveyor belt.

But Andy kept drifting back to the bird machine as it jabbed and jabbed . . . and jabbed at the dolls.

Finally Kyle knelt down next to him. "Looks like that's the only way out, Andy." She turned toward the door. "It looks like we have to go across there."

She means the belt, Andy realized. She means we have to cross right here, right where the bird machine is. We have to pass it. I knew it, he thought. I knew that we'd have to do this.

Suddenly this reminded him of a story his mom had read to him. About Arthur and Galahad and a lot of other knights, whose names he had forgotten. They always had to do scary things, to go on . . . quests. The quests were never easy. There were always these really bad things they had to do.

Like this.

"Do you understand, Andy?" Kyle said. "We have to cross here."

He nodded.

She smiled at him. "Good boy. I'll go first. Then you go." She smiled again. "It won't be so hard."

She took his hand and led him to the belt. The noise it made moving seemed even louder now. She gave his hand a squeeze and then let go

of it. He watched her climb up on the metal lip next to the belt.

He studied the bird machine.

Jab. Jab. Jab.

He saw Kyle tense her legs. She was jiggling on her feet. Bouncing around . . . getting ready.

Jab. Jab. Jab.

Then he heard her take a deep breath.

“One,” she said. The bird jabbed at a doll. The machine, the bird’s neck, moved so fast that it became a big blur.

“Two.” Andy crossed his fingers, and thought, What will I do if she doesn’t make it? What will I do if I’m left alone?

“Three!” Kyle yelled, and she ran across the belt. The bird reared back. Andy knew her timing was wrong. It’s ready to spring at her. She’ll never make it.

But he was wrong. It pauses a bit, he saw, when it pulls back. It pauses just before lunging at the next doll.

And Kyle was across to the other side.

Her words that terrified Andy: “Okay, Andy . . . now it’s your turn. And there’s nothing to it.”

Andy licked his lips and for a second didn’t move. He was too busy watching the bird.

“Come on, Andy!”

Now he moved. He climbed up to the metal lip.

So close to the bird now. He almost expected it to turn and look at him.

It’s probably thinking, This is a tasty morsel that I can catch.

It was an evil machine. All silvery metal and evil.

“Andy . . . hurry!” Kyle yelled. “Just watch the machine. Time your run. It’s not hard.”

But when Andy looked over to Kyle, he saw that she was scared. He saw fear in her eyes. She’s worried about me, he thought. So I guess I should worry about myself.

He watched the machine. Jab. Jab. Jab.

I have to catch it just when it pauses. Just when it gets back to its standing position. He licked his lips. He shuffled his feet a bit. He looked down to make sure there was nothing that would catch his feet.

Jab. Jab. jab.

He took a big breath.

And held it.

It jabbed. Popped back.

And he ran.

And halfway across he felt he was too late, too slow. I'll never make it, he thought.

So he did something he had practiced for a long time, whenever he played G.I. Joe. He let himself fall and roll. As he spun around, he saw the twin pokers of the machine start coming down.

But he was rolling, fast, and then free, tumbling off the belt, right into the arms of Kyle.

Who hugged him tightly and said, "Good boy!"

* * *

The vent led from one end of the warehouse all the way to the other, right near the conveyor belt.

And aren't I just the perfect size, thought Chucky. Absolutely perfect. I was made for crawling through a vent.

Except, now that he was here, now that he could look out and see them trying to escape, he was stopped.

By another grating.

It was too heavy to push. And it was held by four large screws—with the heads on the other side.

But then he looked at his knife-hand and had an idea.

Yeah, it just might work.

He fit the blade into the screw bottoms. It was just sharp enough to gouge a slit in them. He proceeded to unscrew the vent grating from inside. He heard one screw fall to the floor. Then another. And when all four were out, he pushed the grating away from the vent and sent it flying down to the factory floor.

He leaned out of the hole, just a bit, and dug at the wall with his knife as if he were a mountain climber. He jabbed at the wall and then lowered himself to the floor. He looked at his knife-hand, thinking, Why, it's better than my old hand—a lot better.

"I can't open it," Kyle moaned.

Kyle gave the doorknob one more bang with the metal pipe that she'd found on the floor.

It bounced off the doorknob.

"Shit, I can't open it," she said.

Andy looked right and left and then asked Kyle a question he already knew the answer to. "Is there another door . . . another exit?"

Kyle banged the doorknob again. She blew at her hair, to get it off her forehead.

"We'll have to find another way." She tucked the pipe in her back pocket and grabbed his hand again. "Come on."

For a moment he thought she would lead him back to the conveyor belt, to another pass by the eye machine. But—for now—she led him along the other side of the belt, by the machines that made the Good Guy dolls.

He saw them.

Trapped.

Great.

He stepped closer to the conveyor belt.

A Good Guy, flat on its back, sailed past him. Chucky stepped onto the conveyor belt and kicked the doll off, onto the ground.

Enrique Vasquez—Bud, to his American friends—was sipping his cold coffee, thumbing through *Car and Driver.*

My next car, he told himself, will be something with some *cojones.* Something that will—what do they say here?—*eat the road.*

He flipped past a few pages of next year's Z cars. Nice. He nodded to himself. Very nice. I'll get one in black, with black leather upholstery . . . There's nothing like leather. Women love leather. The smell, the feel of it. And—

The buzzer sounded.

He hadn't been watching the screens. Nothing ever happened there. And he was sick of looking at dolls being made. Nothing ever happened.

The alarm was loud. He reached out and hit a button silencing it. And he checked the screen to see what could be the problem. There never was a problem.

But then he saw it—on screen three. The finished dolls, the little red-haired gringos in boxes, were not coming into the warehouse. And there, on screen two, he saw them hunching up and falling off the side of the belt. As if something was stopping them. As if the gate was closed between the factory and the attached warehouse.

"Shit," he said. Nothing ever happens, and now *this.*

He got up and left his small office.

He didn't notice the badly made doll rolling by on screen seven.

They were back near the head-making machine and the big vat of

plastic.

Andy was beginning to think Kyle didn't know what to do. She stopped, and Andy stepped closer to the belt, fascinated with the headless dolls and, out the other side, the dolls with eyeless heads.

He moved a bit farther along the side, closer to the big vat. Then he leaned over and looked into a small puddle, a dry, crusty swirl of plastic.

He heard Kyle yell.

"Watch it!"

He turned and looked up.

He was right near the spout. And a great glop of plastic was falling down.

He was leaning over into the small tub, and the plastic was ready to splat onto his head, but Kyle grabbed him and pulled him back. They fell to the ground. He heard the plastic splatter onto the floor, and then hiss. A small plume of smoke rose up near his feet.

"Damn it, Andy. Watch it. That could have hit you. It would have cooked your brains."

He nodded. She was worried about him, he knew. She was talking about danger. But that's what's supposed to happen, he thought. This is a quest, an adventure. We're supposed to be in danger.

And nothing bad can really happen to us.

He told himself that again.

Nothing bad can happen.

But he knew that that was just in fairy tales.

Bud Vasquez scratched his head and looked up at the line of Good Guys banging against the gate, piling up, and then tumbling to the ground.

I'm in deep trouble here, he thought. It's my shift, my responsibility. The Play Pals people had been real good to him. Nice salary, good benefits. He just had to keep the wheels oiled, the machine running.

He knew he would have to go up and open the gate.

And he was just about to do that when something rolled to his feet. Something blue . . . something like a marble.

"Eh?" he said. He reached down.

It was one of the glass eyes used in the dolls. And then, as he was bent over, another one rolled toward him. It stopped a few feet away, and he walked over to it, over to the corner.

Another came rolling from around the corner, and Bud said, "What the hell?"

He walked around the corner and saw a barrel filled with the blue eyes. He walked up to the barrel and looked down. He dug through the barrel. The marbles made a tremendous clicking sound, rolling together, almost insectlike.

He shook his head. This is strange, he thought, very—

Something jabbed his leg, right into his meaty thigh.

He groaned and spun around.

He saw a doll, with a knife for a hand.

“No,” he said. This wasn’t real. This couldn’t be happening. But the doll jabbed his other leg with the knife, sticking it into his thigh and then twisting it, pulling the wound open wider.

The doll pulled out the blade. And Bud staggered backward . . . toward the conveyor. He fell, and then—just to get off his legs, because he couldn’t stand anymore—he let himself fall onto the belt. It moved him along, climbing upward.

He tried to sit up, to move, to get off the belt now. But his legs wouldn’t move.

I’m losing too much blood.

He heard a thudding sound. A deep spitting noise.

He tried to think what it could be. He knew all the sounds inside the factory. All the noises. All the machines.

He looked ahead. And he saw the two prongs of the eye machine. They seemed to be watching him, holding two glass eyes.

He knew they were for him. He was the next doll in the line.

“No . . . ,” he screamed. “God . . . ,” he whispered.

The machine leaped at him.

Right at his head, right at his eyes. Not caring that he already had eyes.

It was only agony—total agony—for a second.

Kyle grabbed his arm. “What was that?” she said.

Andy heard it. He heard the sound and knew what it was. He had heard sounds like that before. His mother had sounded like that. So had the policeman. He knew what that sound was.

It was screaming.

Then it was over.

“Probably just one of the machines,” Kyle said. But Andy knew that she knew what the sound was too.

They were at the arm-and-leg machine. Andy watched the Good Guys move up to the X-shaped machine. He watched it snap closed

around them, do secret things to them, and then quickly spring open.

Kyle pulled him along, hurrying him. But then she stopped. There didn't seem to be any place to go. Not really.

He watched her turn around and then back into the wall. "I don't know . . . ," she started to say.

Andy heard a click. She must have leaned into a button, he thought. The conveyor stopped. An alarm, a blaring horn sound, filled the factory. It was hooting on and off, on and off. And then the conveyor started running the other way.

"What?" Kyle said. She turned and looked at the wall. Andy saw the button—and read the words below it. Conveyor Belt. Forward/ Reverse. Caution: Conveyor Must Be Clear Before Using Reverse.

Andy turned to watch the belt. A doll that had just gotten its legs and arms moved back into the X-shaped machine. It closed on the doll again. But this time the Good Guy didn't fit. The machine couldn't tell that the doll didn't need any more arms and legs. It chomped on it, and bits of the doll were left hanging out. Now there was steam and a grinding noise that made Andy cover his ears. When the X-shaped machine opened, the doll was an ugly mess.

It didn't look like a Good Guy anymore.

Kyle hit the switch again, and the conveyor started moving forward again. The alarm stopped.

Chucky heard the alarm, booming from a far corner of the factory.

Just over there, he thought.

That's where my little babies are playing. Screwing around with the machinery.

But now I know where they are.

And it's time to end this game of hide and seek.

29

“There has to be another way out of here,” Kyle said. They ran alongside the conveyor belt, following its snaky curves back and forth. And Andy kept looking over the line of dolls that streamed by. They all look like Chucky; they all look the same.

Kyle stopped—trying to see a way out. Andy turned away from the conveyor belt to see what she was looking at.

“Ahhh!” The scream came from behind him . . . from the belt. Andy turned just in time to see one of the dolls stand up. One just like the others.

Only different.

This one had a knife for a hand.

Chucky sliced at Andy and the air whistled.

“Duck!” Kyle screamed. Andy fell to the floor as the knife came close enough that he felt a breeze. Andy looked up to see Kyle take the pipe out of her back pocket.

Chucky wasn’t watching. He was pulling his small arm back for another swing at Andy.

Kyle swung the pipe at Chucky like a baseball bat. She hit the doll on the side and Andy heard the sick thud. The smack knocked Chucky right off the conveyor belt, and he crashed to the floor.

Andy got up off the ground, but Chucky bounced up quickly, as if the pipe hadn’t hurt him at all. Because it didn’t, Andy knew. He’s too strong.

But Kyle pushed past Andy. She ran up to Chucky and gave him another swing while the doll-man was still dazed.

Chucky’s mouth went open in surprise.

Good, Andy thought. I like that.

Chucky went sailing again, flying over to another loop of the conveyor belt. He plopped down, landing on the belt.

Just in front of the stapling machine.

He doesn’t see it, Andy thought. Chucky doesn’t know where he’s headed. He’s facing the wrong way and he doesn’t know what’s going to happen . . .

Andy watched Chucky grin and then start to get up. But when he saw Andy’s face, looked right at it, he saw that Andy was looking at something else . . . just behind him. So Chucky turned to see—

Just when the stapler machine came down.

Andy smiled. The machine landed in Chucky's crotch. Andy watched. Wincing. It stapled Chucky's crotch to the conveyor belt.

Chucky screamed. He spit at the air. His eyes bugged, looking at Andy.

Gosh, thought Andy, he's even *madder* now.

Andy turned and looked at the wall behind Kyle. He saw the button she had hit before. The forward/reverse button. Kyle saw him looking.

"Do it," she said. "Do it, Andy!"

And Andy ran over to the button and pressed it. The alarm sounded, the loud horn that made Andy hold his ears shut tight. Then the alarm stopped and the conveyor belt made a funny noise, but it started running in the other direction.

Past the stapler machine, down toward the other neat machine. The one shaped like an X. The one that put arms and legs on the dolls. Or crushed the ones that already had arms and legs.

Chucky kept kicking at the belt, trying to get off. He dug at his crotch—as if he was itchy or something—trying to get away.

But, Andy saw, he wasn't going anywhere.

Chucky kept looking at the X-shaped machine and then back at Andy. Chucky tried to smile. But it didn't look good. His eyes looked sad. Chucky opened his mouth, and Andy could still see those ugly little plastic teeth.

"Andy, please!" he cried. "I was only playing! Come on, Andy."

The conveyor belt kept moving. Andy went a bit closer. It was safe now. But he felt Kyle's hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

"Get real," Andy said to Chucky.

Chucky floated up to the X-shaped machine. He sneered, his face turned ugly again.

Madder and madder, thought Andy.

He was almost there. Just another foot. The machine opened, and for a second Andy thought Chucky would miss it.

But—Andy smiled—that didn't happen.

Chucky went bug-eyed as the arm-and-leg machine snapped closed around him.

Kyle hugged Andy tight. The machine hissed. Bits of Chucky's body were squeezed through it.

No, Andy saw, they kind of *oozed* out the edges.

The machine seemed to chew at the doll, grinding and and whining, and then it popped open.

And what was there—all red and slimy plastic covered by bits of

Good Guy overalls!—wasn't Chucky anymore.

It was still stapled to the belt, but it didn't move now. Kyle took a breath, and then she looked down at Andy and smiled at him. "I can see why the neighborhood kids don't like playing with you."

Andy grinned at her.

"Come on," Kyle said. "Let's get out of here."

* * *

They walked now, slowly, not worrying about anything. It was all over. They could take their time finding a safe way out of the warehouse.

They passed the head-molder—still squirting heads onto the belt, right next to the bubbling vat of plastic goo. Andy made sure to keep well away from the overflow spout.

"You okay?" Kyle asked.

Andy nodded. "Yeah. Thanks for coming after me."

"You owe me one, squirt. I . . ."

Then this shadow blocked the light. Andy looked up. And this thing—it was a body, a man's body—swung down from cables. It crashed into Kyle, knocking her backward, right onto the conveyor belt.

Andy looked at the body, swinging back and forth, and saw that the man had glass eyes, surrounded by dried, crusty blood. The body swung one more time and then landed right next to Kyle. Both of them, together, moving on the conveyor belt.

"Kyle!" Andy screamed.

She was gliding up. He saw Kyle's face. Her eyes were shut tight and she was sprawled on the belt.

Close by, right at her feet, he saw the man with Good Guy eyes staring off into space, his mouth wide open. They were both moving toward the arm-and-leg machine.

Andy heard the machine closing . . . and opening. Kyle kept moving toward it.

Andy took a step.

He heard something from behind him. A clicking sound. Then a squeaking noise. The sound his roller skates made after the winter . . . when they need oil.

He turned around. Thinking, I've got to get to Kyle. I've got to get her off of there.

He turned to the sound and looked.

It was Chucky.

Sort of.

There was a head. And one eye. But only half his body. He had no legs anymore. And all this stuff dangled from his waist. Wires and tubes, all covered in shimmering red.

He was on a wood cart. And he dug out with his twisted arm—still with the knife-hand—pulling at the ground. And now the mouth opened—all crooked and twisted, the voice stranger than ever.

I've seen someone like this! Andy thought. It was Christmas and we were shopping and this man came up. He was on a cart. He sold things. The man had scared Andy.

But not as much as this.

"Look," the voice croaked. He sounded like an animal trying to talk. "Look what you've done to me, boy. Look what you've done to me!"

Chucky dug at the ground with his knife. It clicked. The wheels squeaked.

While behind him Andy heard the sound of the conveyor belt—and beyond.

The machine closing . . . and opening . . . and closing again.

30

Chucky wheeled closer, his knife clicking on the ground like a crab's claw.

"I've got you now, Andy. And you know what I'm going to do to you? I'm going to cut off *your* legs too!"

Andy backed up, bumping into something hot. He spun around.

It was the big vat of plastic. He heard it bubbling above him.

Chucky's blade clicked on the ground.

"No legs, Andy. Maybe no arms either. How does that sound? How does . . ."

Andy turned and looked at the conveyor belt. Please, he thought. Please, Kyle . . . get up. Please.

But she was still lying on the belt with her eyes shut tight. And the dead man in front of her was almost at the arm-and-leg machine.

Andy turned to face Chucky, who wheeled up to him and, laughing his terrible witch laugh, slashed at Andy.

Andy rolled to the side, spinning around, away from Chucky but still watching the conveyor belt.

The man was almost there. The X-shaped jaw opened.

Another slash, and Andy yelped, following the curve of the vat. Chucky's knife was coming right toward him.

But it hooked a rubber wire that ran up the side of the vat. Chucky's knife hooked it and then sliced right through it.

Steam whooshed through the tube, causing it to dance around, shooting steam up and down, everywhere.

A glop of hot plastic fell at Andy's feet, splattering on the ground, hissing.

Andy's head bumped against something.

It was a faucet. He read the metal plate next to it. Overflow Release.

Chucky slid closer.

Andy looked above Chucky. He's right under the spigot, Andy realized. He reached up and turned the faucet.

It didn't move.

Chucky stabbed at him.

Andy moved his legs apart, and Chucky's blade went into the metal vat. And stuck there.

“No,” Chucky yelled. He tugged on the blade, while Andy kept trying to turn the faucet.

Andy looked at the belt. The man was at the X-shaped machine.

Andy grabbed the faucet with two hands and hung from it, grunting, twisting his hands.

Chucky worked at his knife, pulling at it.

The knife popped free.

The faucet moved.

And then all this pink-colored plastic—skin-colored goo—gushed down on Chucky. Andy saw the doll-man look up at it just before it covered him. It looked like a scene out of a Three Stooges show. “You knucklehead,” Moe always called Curly. “You knucklehead. Look what you’ve done now!”

Chucky screamed, “Noooooo!”

His face melted under the plastic, and his body melted right off its cart.

I can still see an eye, Andy told himself. I can still see his eye!

The doll gurgled. Big rubbery bubbles grew on the wet mess. Andy stood there for just a second. It didn’t move anymore. It looks like throw-up, Andy thought as he turned and ran to the conveyor belt.

The machine closed on the man. Andy heard it shut and start making grinding sounds as if it were chewing on him. Blood dripped from the side—just like his mom’s pancake maker, Andy thought, when it overflowed.

He climbed onto the belt. He had to climb over the dolls to get to Kyle, but he managed to grab her hand and tug at her.

“Kyle! Wake up. Come on, Kyle, you have to wake up!”

The machine popped open, and Andy smelled the body, the blood.

He kept on tugging. The X-shaped machine was ready to eat someone else.

“Kyle!” he screamed.

She opened her eyes.

“What?” she said.

Andy looked to the side, just off the conveyor belt. It was a big fall.

The machine hissed.

Andy pulled with all his might, jumping to the side—pulling Kyle off with him.

They tumbled to the concrete floor just as the machine closed on nothing.

Kyle looked at Andy. Then up at the conveyor belt. She pulled him

close and hugged him.

It felt good. And Andy thought he might cry. No. I can't cry, he thought. Not now.

Maybe not ever.

"Are you okay?" he asked Kyle instead.

"Yeah. My bones hurt, but . . . what happened?"

Andy turned and pointed at the vat and the pile of melted goo next to it. "Look," he said.

Kyle tried to get up, and Andy grabbed her hand and helped her to her feet. She walked over to what was left of Chucky. The cut steam tube danced all around it.

Kyle went up to the pile and stopped a second. She leaned down over the pile. Andy saw the one eye, kind of floating there.

"Jesus, Andy . . . What did you do to him?" She squatted down. And she grinned. "I got to hand it to you, kid. You really did it. He's . . ."

Andy was grinning too, smiling, real proud. I took care of him, he thought. I took care of the—

The eye moved. Or maybe it just shifted a bit in the gooey plastic. Maybe—

No, it moved. It looked up, toward Kyle. And before Andy could scream or yell or anything, the goo seemed to rise up. There was a shape, almost like a head, coming out of the goo. Half a head, dripping, with the eye locked on Kyle.

And then, as Andy grabbed Kyle to pull her back, something else twisted out of the goo. An arm. And bits of fingers.

And then a great big bubbling hole. A lopsided hole that made grunting noises, gurgling like the big white bowl you spit in at the dentist's.

The hand with the twisted gooey fingers grabbed Kyle's shirt. She screamed.

We were stupid, Andy thought. We were stupid to think we could *ever* kill Chucky.

The hole, the mouth, kept snapping at the air, then closer to Kyle, as the fingers held her.

Andy stood there, watching. I've got to pull him off. I've got to get him off of her!

Kyle backed away and bumped into the hose. She tried to grab it, reaching around, always a second too late as it danced away.

Why does she want the hose? Andy wondered.

Then, thinking of his last birthday party, he knew why.

Come on, Kyle, he thought. Get it!

Her hand closed on the hose.

Chucky's mouth snapped at her.

"Eat this, you son of a bitch!" Kyle yelled. And she stuck the hose right into the mouth, then deep, inside the gooey ball.

The Chucky-thing—it wasn't like a doll anymore—tried to grab at the hose. But Kyle forced it down.

Chucky's eye rolled around in the head. It came to rest staring at Andy.

He's scared, thought Andy. Good.

Kyle pushed the doll off of her. The steam whooshed inside Chucky. The head was bubbling, then growing bigger and bigger.

"Come on!" Kyle yelled, pulling Andy away. They ran, hand in hand, as fast as they could.

Kyle ducked under the conveyor belt, pulling Andy down. But he turned and took one last look at Chucky, who was getting bigger and bigger. Like a birthday balloon when someone just doesn't stop blowing—until . . .

Kyle pulled him down.

He heard the explosion. The giant popping sound. And then above them they saw the air fill with thousands of tiny pieces blasting up, up, and then falling down, like rain, all over the factory.

The pieces covered everything. Kyle held Andy's hand, holding him there for a long time, until it was all over.

And then she pulled him out.

Andy looked around.

There was Chucky goo everywhere.

"Let's get out of here," Kyle said, as she pulled him along.

While Andy took care not to step on any of the pieces.

* * *

They made their way back to the loading door, and after looking around, Kyle found the button that opened it. Another alarm went off, but that didn't matter anymore.

As soon as the door opened, Andy saw the sun, just ahead, a bright red ball. The light felt good on his face. And the breeze. The air smelled wonderful and clear.

They walked down the steps.

"Where are we going?" Andy asked.

Kyle shrugged. "Home."

Home? he thought. What does that mean? Home. My home's gone .

. . for now.

“Where’s home?” he said.

Kyle held him close, walking to the gate out of Play Pals. The parking lot was still deserted . . . it must have been too early for the workers.

“I have no idea,” she said, turning to look at him. “I guess that means I’m stuck with you, kiddo.” And she smiled at him.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said.

They were well away from the building, going through the entrance gate, when Andy looked over his shoulder.

Right at the big Good Guy waving at them, its arm moving up and down, so slowly. Good-bye, it seemed to say. See you real soon.

Andy took Kyle’s hand.

Knowing that he’d go . . . wherever she took him.

Epilogue

The plastic resin, the melted parts of Chucky, had exploded into the air. The air filled with the pieces, like a blinding hailstorm.

But still the doll-making machinery labored on. Spitting out heads. Attaching arms and legs. Sticking eyes into doll skulls.

Alarms rang from every corner of the factory.

And inside the vat of bubbling plastic, right on the surface, something landed—and floated on the thick plastic scum.

Something blue and glassy.

A piece of Chucky.

His eye.

It floated for just a few seconds before the suction inside the vat caught it and pulled it down . . . into the pipes.

Into the head-making machine.

The pipes rattled—there shouldn't have been anything solid in the mixture. And then the sprayers seemed to have some trouble, as though something was still melting down here, where the heads were sprayed.

Then everything was once again all right.

A new torso, from an endless line of Good Guy torsos, rolled into place. And the head-spitting machine spit out an eyeless, bald doll head.

The sockets were dark, empty, much in need of eyes.

The doll moved on to the next stage.

But as the doll moved past the vat, the face moved.

Just a bit.

As if it wasn't quite time.

The cheeks curved up—just the slightest bit. Curved into the beginning of a grotesque smile.

Then the face relaxed.

Patient, ready to wait . . . for the rest of its body, for its new eyes.

For its new life.